

DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS

DATE - 21/07/2026

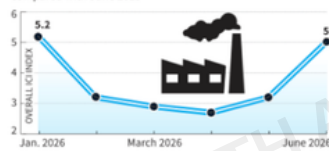
**SOURCE : THE HINDU & INDIAN
EXPRESS**

**CIVILS WITH AKASH
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

Core sectors grow at five-month high of 5%

Sharp uptick

The Index of Core Industries grew by 5% in June 2026 compared with June 2025



T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

India's core industrial sectors grew at 5% in June 2026, the fastest in five months, as per the inaugural release of the new and updated series of the Index of Core Industries (ICI).

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry on Monday released the new series of the ICI, with an updated base year of 2022-23 from the earlier 2011-12. Further, the updated index has an additional sector of iron ore added to it, taking the total number of sectors it covers to nine. The sectoral weights and methods of estimation have also been updated.

Within the index, the fastest growth was recorded by iron ore, which grew 43.9% in June 2026 against 19% in May.

Statistical base effect

This growth, however, was likely due to a statistical base effect, since the sector contracted 16.4% in June last year.

Electricity, cement, steel, and coal grew 9.8%, 9.8%, 4.6% and 1.4% respectively.

"The Index of Core Industries grew by 5% in June 2026 [provisional estimate] on a year-on-year basis, compared with June 2025," the Office of Economic Adviser in the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) said.

"This marks an improvement over the growth rate of 3.2% recorded in May 2026 [final estimate]."

The Index of Core Industries last grew faster in January 2026 when it hit a growth of 5.2%, as per the new series. "Owing to intensive use of iron ore in the production process, and its contribution to industrial development, it has been included in the list of core industries as a new item in the revised series of ICI (base year 2022-23)," the Ministry said in a statement.

Nearly all the sectors relating to hydrocarbon energy and its products, such as crude oil (-4.2%), natural gas (-7.4%), refinery products (-4.7%), and fertilisers (-3.3%) contracted in June 2026.

"The entire crude oil related sectors – crude oil, gas, refinery products and fertilisers – witnessed negative growth in June which can be attributed to higher imports with global crude prices cooling off," Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at the Bank of Baroda said.

"The export of refinery products had slowed down this month. In case of fertilisers, imports tended to increase."

- Negative Growth Crude Oil: -4.2%
- Natural Gas: -7.4%
- Refinery Products: -4.7%
- Fertilisers: -3.3%

- Reason for high Iron Ore growth: Statistical Base Effect (low production in June 2025).

Static Linkages

- Index of Core Industries (ICI) is a leading indicator of industrial growth.
- Index of Industrial Production (IIP) covers Mining, Manufacturing and Electricity sectors.
- Core industries account for 40.27% of the weight in the IIP.
- Base Year Revision improves statistical accuracy by reflecting changes in production structure and consumption patterns.
- Base Effect: A low output in the previous year can artificially inflate the current year's growth rate.
- Higher growth in steel, cement and electricity generally indicates improvement in infrastructure and construction activity.
- Persistent decline in crude oil and natural gas reflects India's continued dependence on energy imports.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Updated base year reflects the present industrial structure.
- Inclusion of Iron Ore improves representation of the mining sector.
- Better indicator for industrial and infrastructure performance.
- Supports evidence-based economic policymaking.

Challenges

- High growth partly driven by the base effect rather than broad-based expansion.
- Declining hydrocarbon sectors indicate continued import dependence.
- Weak refinery output may affect petroleum exports.
- Fertiliser contraction could impact agricultural input availability.

Way Forward

- Periodically revise statistical indices to reflect structural changes.
- Increase domestic exploration of oil and natural gas.
- Strengthen critical mineral and iron ore supply chains.
- Promote renewable energy to reduce fossil fuel dependence.
- Improve industrial competitiveness through technology and logistics reforms.
- Enhance quality and timeliness of industrial data.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- The Ministry of Commerce & Industry released the revised Index of Core Industries (ICI) with 2022-23 as the new base year, replacing 2011-12.
- Iron Ore has been included as the 9th core industry.
- The revised index recorded 5% YoY growth in June 2026, the highest in the last five months.

Key Points

- Published by: Office of the Economic Adviser (OEA), DPIIT, Ministry of Commerce & Industry.
- Purpose: Measures the production performance of India's core infrastructure industries.
- Base Year: 2022-23 (Earlier: 2011-12).
 - Core Industries (9): Coal, Crude Oil, Natural Gas, Refinery Products, Fertilisers, Steel, Cement, Electricity, Iron Ore (Newly Added)
- Weight in IIP: 40.27% (Revised Series).
 - June 2026 Growth Overall ICI: 5%
 - Iron Ore: 43.9%
 - Electricity: 9.8%
 - Cement: 9.8%
 - Steel: 4.6%
 - Coal: 1.4%

Four Indians killed near Ukrainian port of Odessa

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Four Indian citizens were killed and one was critically injured in an attack on a merchant vessel near the Ukrainian port of Odessa on Sunday.

India condemned the incident and called such attacks impeding freedom of navigation "deplorable".

The Ministry of External Affairs on Monday reiterated India's opposition to attacks on merchant vessels as such incidents violate the freedom of navigation.

The Acting Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Andrii Sybiha, has blamed Russia for the attack and said five crew members of the ship remain missing.

"On the evening of 19 July 2026, vessel MV Golden Leo was attacked while de-



Caught in a war: Smoke rising from civilian cargo ship Golden Leo in the Black Sea, following an alleged Russian missile strike on Sunday. AFP

parting the port of Odessa.

At the time of the incident, there were 17 crew members on board, including five Indians. As per information available, four Indian nationals have tragically lost their lives, while one is hospitalised in a critical condition," said the Ministry in its statement.

"India condemns such attacks and reiterates that targeting commercial shipping and endangering innocent civilian crew members, or otherwise impeding freedom of navigation and commerce is deplorable and should be avoided," said the MEA in its statement.

The incident comes amid the death of several Indian seafarers in the continuing attacks by the U.S. and Iran on commercial vessels in the Gulf.

The Ukraine's Acting Foreign Minister said the attack was not an isolated incident. "Russia has now struck a civilian vessel na-

vigating Ukraine's maritime corridor. The crew included citizens of Syria and India. A Ukrainian maritime pilot was killed," said Mr. Sybiha. He said Russia attacked another merchant vessel with the flag of Antigua and Barbuda in the Black Sea on Saturday.

Mr. Sybiha said Ukraine had informed the International Maritime Organization and Ukraine's international partners "about Russia's latest attacks on civilian shipping, as well as the states whose citizens were killed or injured."

Maritime Trade News has reported that Golden Leo was carrying a crew of 17 Syrian and Indian nationals and that at least 10 sailors were killed in the attack. The Russian authorities are yet to comment on the incident.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Four Indian seafarers were killed and one critically injured after the merchant vessel MV Golden Leo was attacked while departing Odessa Port (Ukraine) on 19 July 2026.
- Ukraine attributed the attack to Russia; Russia had not officially responded at the time of reporting.
- India condemned the attack, stating that targeting commercial shipping and civilian crew members violates the principle of freedom of navigation.
- Ukraine informed the International Maritime Organization (IMO) regarding the incident.

Key Points

- Odessa is Ukraine's principal port on the Black Sea, crucial for grain exports.
- The attack highlights the increasing risks to merchant shipping amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict.
- India reiterated support for:
 - Freedom of navigation.
 - Uninterrupted maritime commerce.
 - Protection of civilian seafarers.
- India is among the largest suppliers of seafarers to the global merchant fleet.
- Disruptions to maritime trade can affect:
 - Global food security.
 - Energy supply chains.
 - Freight and insurance costs.

Static Linkages

- UNCLOS, 1982 Guarantees freedom of navigation on the high seas.
- Provides the legal framework governing maritime activities.
- International Maritime Organization (IMO) UN specialized agency.
- Headquarters: London, United Kingdom.
- Functions:
 - Maritime safety.

- Maritime security.
- Prevention of marine pollution.
- Black Sea Connected to the Mediterranean Sea through:
 - Bosphorus Strait
 - Sea of Marmara
 - Dardanelles Strait
- Odessa Port Ukraine's largest commercial seaport.
- Key gateway for grain exports under Black Sea trade routes.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Reinforces the importance of freedom of navigation for global trade.
- Highlights the vulnerability of Indian seafarers in conflict zones.
- Demonstrates the economic impact of geopolitical conflicts on maritime trade.

Challenges

- Escalating attacks on merchant vessels.
- Weak enforcement of international maritime law during armed conflicts.
- Rising shipping insurance and transportation costs.
- Threat to global supply chains and food security.

Way Forward

- Strengthen international cooperation through the IMO and the UN.
- Enhance protection and advisories for Indian seafarers.
- Promote adherence to UNCLOS and international humanitarian law.
- Improve maritime domain awareness and crisis-response mechanisms.
- Encourage peaceful resolution of maritime conflicts through diplomacy.

Reclaiming footpaths, taking cities back from cars

Few sights are more ordinary in an Indian city than a pedestrian being pushed off a footpath and onto the road. A mother, holding a school bag in one hand and a child in the other, walks around a parked car. An elderly man tests a broken footpath before stepping down onto the road. A wheelchair user gives up before the journey has even begun. A vendor, debris, an openly urinating pedestrian, and a signboard together form what is still, with bureaucratic optimism, called a pavement. The citizen is then forced to walk on a road designed as though only vehicles possess rights.



Chandrakant Lahariya
Practising specialist in preventive and cardiometabolic medicine with nearly 18 years of work experience with the World Health Organization and the United Nations system

Unboding walkability

In June 2026, the Supreme Court of India gave constitutional language to this daily indignity, in *Maniyar Riyaz @ Shaik Riyaz vs P. Ayyappan* (2026). It held that walking on dedicated footpaths is a fundamental constitutional right, protected under Article 19(1)(d) and Article 21 of the Constitution. It observed that pedestrians have a right to safe footpaths and footways, and directed States and Union Territories to frame policies and guidelines for their provision and maintenance. This is not a minor municipal instruction. It is a public health intervention, a road safety measure, and a democratic test of whether Indian cities are built for people or merely for machines.

The timing could not be more urgent. India is becoming less active precisely when it needs movement the most. Health risk factors and diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, fatty liver disease, and obesity are rising rapidly, as reported by every newly available population health dataset.

Walking and increased physical activity are among the low-cost interventions that can halt and reverse this rise in metabolic diseases. Yet, the World Health Organization (WHO)'s India Physical Activity Profile 2024 estimates that 49.4% of Indian adults do not meet the recommended levels of physical activity; among women, the figure is 57.2%. Among children and adolescents aged 11 to 17 years, it is 74%. WHO recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week for adults. For most citizens, this does not mean gym memberships or elite fitness routines. It means having the ability to walk safely to a bus stop, school, market, clinic, metro station, or park.

These are not failures of willpower alone; rather, they are exacerbated by the built environment. A city that makes walking difficult quietly prescribes sedentary living. Footpaths, therefore, are not decorative strips of cement

added after roads have been designed. They are preventive medicine laid in stone. A usable pavement allows children to walk to school, office-goers to use public transport, older adults to remain mobile, and women to move safely. Walking improves blood pressure, insulin sensitivity, weight control, mood, sleep, and joint function. It is the simplest health habit available to the largest number of citizens. Yet, we in India have made it difficult and dangerous. Many Indians would prefer to use cars and scooters less if cities offered safe, continuous, shaded footpaths.

The road safety argument is equally compelling. The Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (Transport Research Wing) 'Road Accidents in India 2024' report found that two-wheeler riders and pedestrians together accounted for nearly 67% of road fatalities, with 1.28 lakh deaths among these vulnerable groups. The National Crime Records Bureau's 2024 data place the number at more than 1.1 lakh and the share at least 60%. The exact totals differ across official sources, but the message is unambiguous: pedestrians and two-wheeler riders remain India's most vulnerable road users. Every time a footpath disappears, the road becomes a contest between flesh and metal.

Orderly shared streets

The solution cannot be episodic: anti-encroachment drives, in which a few carts and cars are removed before the same disorder returns the following week. Nor can it be a punitive war on street vendors, who are workers with legal protections and legitimate economic claims. The answer lies in planned allocation: footpaths for walking, vending zones for vendors, parking spaces for vehicles, utility corridors for public infrastructure, and meaningful penalties for violations. A humane city organises the street so that livelihoods and mobility can coexist without endangering lives.

Citizens, too, have a role, though not the only one. First, walk deliberately: begin with 10 to 15 minutes after two major meals, or build towards 30 minutes at a fixed time each day. Second, convert short errands into walking errands: distances under one kilometre should not automatically require a scooter or car. Third, combine walking with public transport by using the metro, bus, or shared mobility for part of the commute. Fourth, make walking social: families, resident welfare associations, and workplaces can create walking groups and car-free morning routines. Fifth, reclaim walking as a health check. If breathlessness, knee pain, fear of falling, or

unsafe streets prevent walking, treat that as a signal to seek medical advice, improve strength, or demand civic correction. Most importantly, the recent Supreme Court decision has given citizens and resident welfare associations an opportunity to demand their right to walk on encroachment-free footpaths.

Yet, citizens cannot easily walk their way out of poor urban planning. Civic bodies and governments must act with seriousness. Every road project should include continuous, shaded, well-lit, and barrier-free footpaths, along with safe crossings. Footpaths must be wide enough for two people or a wheelchair, with ramps and clear passageways near bus stops. Encroachment control should be continuous, transparent, and fair. Parking on footpaths must invite stringent action, with penalties that change behaviour. Street design should prioritise schools, hospitals, bus stops, markets, and metro stations, where pedestrian volumes are high. Tree cover, benches, public toilets, and lighting are not embellishments; they determine whether women, children, persons with disabilities, and older people can walk.

Policy action

India also needs a national active-mobility mission linking urban development, transport, health, and education. Cities and urban planning should be assessed not by the length of flyovers built, but by the number of safe walking kilometres created. Municipal commissioners should publish ward-level footpath maps and annual audits of encroachment-free footpaths. School zones should have traffic calming measures and protected crossings. Employers should encourage active commuting. Doctors should prescribe walking advice to manage behaviour, but governments must provide the pavements on which those prescriptions can be followed.

The Supreme Court has moved the footpath from the margins of municipal housekeeping to the centre of constitutional rights. The next task is to move it from judgment to habit, budget, design, and enforcement. A country battling diabetes, hypertension, obesity, stress, and road deaths cannot treat walking as an afterthought. India does not merely need more roads; it needs more rights of way for ordinary citizens. The footpath is where public health, dignity, and democracy meet. We need to take our cities back from cars. We need to rebuild our cities for people. The proportion of encroachment-free footpaths should become a barometer of whether elected governments value citizens' fundamental rights in every ward and on every major road.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- In June 2026, the Supreme Court in *Maniyar Iliyaz @ Shaik Riyaz vs. P. Ayyappan* (2026) held that walking on demarcated footpaths is a Fundamental Right.
- The Court ruled that safe and accessible footpaths are protected under Article 19(1)(d) (Freedom of Movement) and Article 21 (Right to Life).
- It directed all States and Union Territories to frame policies and guidelines for the construction, maintenance, and protection of footpaths.
- The judgment reinforces pedestrian rights, inclusive urban planning, road safety, and active mobility.

Key Points

- Walking on safe footpaths is a Fundamental Right under Articles 19(1)(d) and 21.
- States/UTs must develop footpath policies and maintenance guidelines.
 - WHO India Physical Activity Profile 2024: 49.4% of adults are physically inactive.
 - 57.2% of women do not meet recommended activity levels.
 - 74% of adolescents (11–17 years) are insufficiently active.
 - WHO recommends 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week for adults.
 - Road Accidents in India 2024 (MoRTH): Pedestrians and two-wheeler users account for nearly 67% of road fatalities, highlighting the need for safer pedestrian infrastructure.

- Walkable cities support:

- Public health
- Road safety
- Sustainable transport
- Social inclusion
- Universal accessibility

Static Linkages

- Article 19(1)(d) – Freedom to move freely throughout India.
- Article 21 – Right to Life includes the right to live with dignity and safety.
- Article 14 – Equality before law and equal access to public infrastructure.
- Article 243W & Twelfth Schedule – Urban planning, roads, bridges, and public amenities are functions of Urban Local Bodies.
- Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 – Mandates barrier-free public infrastructure.
- Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 – Balances livelihood protection with regulated vending.
- National Urban Transport Policy (2006) – Promotes "Moving People, Not Vehicles."
- MoHUA Complete Streets Framework – Prioritises pedestrians and non-motorised transport.
- SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being.
- SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Expands the scope of Article 21 through pedestrian rights.
- Promotes human-centric urban planning over vehicle-centric planning.
- Supports preventive healthcare by encouraging walking.
- Improves road safety for vulnerable road users.
- Strengthens accessibility for women, children, elderly, and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs).

Challenges

- Widespread encroachment of footpaths.
- Weak enforcement by Urban Local Bodies.
- Inadequate funding for pedestrian infrastructure.
- Lack of universal accessibility standards.
- Poor coordination among urban agencies.
- Car-centric urban development.

Way Forward

- Make continuous, barrier-free footpaths mandatory in all urban road projects.
- Strict enforcement against parking and encroachments on footpaths.
- Develop dedicated vending zones under the Street Vendors Act.
- Integrate walking with public transport planning.
- Conduct periodic walkability audits by Urban Local Bodies.
- Promote Complete Streets and Transit-Oriented Development (TOD).
- Launch a National Active Mobility Mission linking health, transport, and urban development.

Canada-India defence collaboration for a secure future

Canada is seeing an historic shift for our country – one that opens new opportunities for relations between Canada and India. Speaking at CANSEC 2026, Canada's leading defence, security and emerging technology event, on May 27, 2026, Prime Minister Mark Carney said: "The very nature of war is rapidly evolving, driven by the proliferation of drones, autonomous systems, and weapons in orbit. Conflicts could emerge closer to our borders than before, and new weapons are reducing the distance that separates us from them. The world has changed, and Canada must change with it. That is why, six weeks after forming the government, we announced our ambitious plan to rebuild, rearm, and reinvent in the Canadian Armed Forces."

This is at a time when the world is changing, and Canada-India defence collaboration can translate into a strategy for a secure future. The good news is that we are already walking on this path. In 2025, Mr. Carney announced that Canada is on track to spend 5% of its GDP on defence by 2035. In March, we already surpassed 2% of the GDP, placing Canada among one of the 10 largest economies in the world. As Mr. Carney said during his speech in January 2026 at the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos, there has been a rupture in the world order. Or as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said, we are living through a decade of crisis.

Bilateral defence engagement
In this changing world, defence cooperation between Canada and India has become crucial and we have already taken steps to bolster it. Most recently, we accredited Defence Advisers in both Ottawa and Delhi. Mr. Carney and Mr. Modi agreed to establish a Defence Dialogue to



Chris Cooter
High Commissioner
for Canada to India

prioritise cooperation on shared interests and align capacities. Canadian and Indian navies participated in the Rim of the Pacific exercises and Talisman Sabre exercises. In June this year, a delegation from India's National Defence College visited Canada. This will allow Indian officers to have direct exchanges with military colleges and bases in Canada.

We have established a national Defence Investment Agency to streamline military procurement. We have also launched a defence industrial strategy to diversify supply chains so Canada does not rely on just one country. That is why we are calling on natural partners such as India to participate in co-development, subsystem manufacturing, and sustainment. We are investing in innovation, including through a half billion-dollar investment in next generation aerospace technologies, including a drone innovation hub.

Strategic technology cooperation
Canada's strengths in advanced technologies can complement India's scale, manufacturing capacity, and expanding industrial base. Canada is one of only a few countries with a full-spectrum aerospace sector, while India's domestic aviation industry is the third largest domestic market in the world. Canada is a research and development powerhouse, while India is focused on advancing innovation capacity and high-end manufacturing.

Canada and India are part of a small group of countries with advanced space capabilities. The importance of civilian space cooperation was highlighted in the joint statement between our two Prime Ministers. Canada's strengths in advanced components for satellite technology and space robotics can complement India's strengths in low-cost platforms. Canada's RADARSAT constellation system can have

application in meeting India's aim of advancing its naval capacity in the region. Critical minerals are the building block of defence technologies – another area where Canada and India can expand their partnership. Amid the crisis in West Asia, national security and economic security are inextricably linked. Here, a critical partnership between Canada and India can take shape.

Canada has vast geological reserves of 31 critical minerals from cobalt to helium. Canada holds the tenth largest reserves of rare earth elements, the third largest recoverable resources of uranium, and 5% of the world's tungsten reserves. Additionally, Canada is the second largest producer and exporter of uranium globally, with 24% of global production in 2024. Canada has embarked on a strategy to diversify its trusted partners. For India, there is a need for reliable partners such as Canada to reach its own economic and national security goals. The Canada-India memorandum of understanding on Critical Minerals Value Chain, signed during Mr. Carney's visit to India in February-March 2026, laid the groundwork for the integration of stable, resilient supply chains between the two countries.

Building on shared legacy

As we look forward, it is worth recalling our shared history and common sacrifice. Recently, I visited the Kirkee War Cemetery in Pune where members of the Royal Canadian Air Force killed during the Second World War were laid to rest. As I walked through the memorial site, I was reminded that our countries have stood shoulder to shoulder in the past, not just on the battlefield but for common causes and for the shared security of our countries. Let us continue that long-standing tradition as we reshape the defence cooperation between our two countries.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Canada has announced a major shift in its defence policy in response to evolving global security challenges and emerging technologies.
- India and Canada have agreed to strengthen defence cooperation through a Defence Dialogue, defence industrial collaboration, space technology, and critical minerals.
- The partnership aligns with both countries' objective of enhancing resilience in the Indo-Pacific and securing strategic supply chains.

Key Points

Defence Cooperation

- Defence Advisers appointed in Ottawa and New Delhi.
- Agreement to establish a Canada-India Defence Dialogue.
- Participation in joint military exercises:
 - RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific Exercise)
 - Exercise Talisman Sabre
- Exchange between India's National Defence College and Canadian military institutions.

Defence Industrial Cooperation

- Canada established a Defence Investment Agency.
- Launched a Defence Industrial Strategy to diversify defence supply chains.
- Potential cooperation in:
 - Defence manufacturing
 - Aerospace
 - Drones
 - Defence innovation
 - Maintenance and sustainment

Space Cooperation

- Canada has expertise in:
 - RADARSAT (Synthetic Aperture Radar satellites)
 - Space robotics
 - Satellite components
- India contributes:

- Cost-effective satellite manufacturing
- Launch capabilities
- Expanding space ecosystem

Critical Minerals

- Canada possesses reserves of 31 critical minerals.
- Key resources:
 - Rare Earth Elements
 - Uranium
 - Cobalt
 - Tungsten
- India-Canada MoU on Critical Minerals Value Chain (2026) aims to build resilient supply chains.

Importance for India

- Supports Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence.
- Diversifies sources of strategic minerals.
- Enhances defence manufacturing capability.
- Strengthens Indo-Pacific strategic partnerships.

Static Linkages

- Strategic Autonomy remains the cornerstone of India's foreign policy.
- Defence cooperation includes:
 - Joint exercises
 - Military exchanges
 - Technology transfer
 - Defence industrial collaboration
- Critical minerals are essential for:
 - Defence equipment
 - Semiconductors
 - Electric vehicles
 - Renewable energy
- Defence indigenisation initiatives:
 - Atmanirbhar Bharat
 - Make in India
 - iDEX
 - Defence Industrial Corridors
- Space technology supports:
 - Maritime Domain Awareness
 - Border surveillance
 - Disaster management

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Diversifies India's defence partnerships.
- Strengthens trusted critical mineral supply chains.
- Supports indigenous defence manufacturing.
- Enhances cooperation in emerging technologies.
- Promotes Indo-Pacific security.

Challenges

- Bilateral political trust needs sustained improvement.
- Export control and technology transfer restrictions.
- High investment requirements for defence manufacturing.
- Global competition for critical minerals.

Way Forward

- Institutionalise annual Defence Dialogue.
- Expand joint military exercises.
- Promote defence co-development and co-production.
- Operationalise the Critical Minerals MoU.
- Deepen cooperation in AI, cyber security, drones and space technology.

Allowing dissent

Using criminal law to protect reputation of rulers is condemnable

At the heart of democratic disposition is tolerance of dissent and upholding of the rule of law; threats to these can undo the knit of a democracy. In the first couple of months of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK)'s rule in Tamil Nadu, at least 10 people have been subject to police action, on account of speaking against the Chief Minister or his cabinet colleagues. While the case of former Minister Anitha Radhakrishnan's arrest for criticising Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay gained the spotlight, there were several others who were arrested or faced police action over the course of this period. This includes James Raja of Tirunelveli; V. Vishnu prabhu and T. Manojkumar, residents of Coimbatore, for a Facebook post criticising the Chief Minister; and Thangamani of Karur. In the case of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)'s Gen Z wing leader A. Anbanantham, police searched his residence claiming that he made 'derogatory' posts regarding Mr. Vijay and his family. YouTuber Maridhas was arrested by the Chennai Cyber Crime police for his remarks against the Chief Minister and Industries Minister S. Keerthana. DMK MLA Markandayan was arrested in Thoothukudi over an alleged threat he made against the Chief Minister. Others arrested include Vinoth Suryakumar who commented on HR&CE Minister S. Ramesh and RJ Saran Jayaraman who was arrested by the police for content posted on Instagram targeting a woman who supported the TVK. A case was also filed against Indrani Sudalaimuthu for remarks made against S. Ramesh.

Political actors of all hues have normalised using the police and criminal law as a shield to protect their reputation, whenever they come to power. This creates a structural risk for democracy. The actions of the police indicate a wider pattern of speech-related arrests, and authoritarianism under the TVK government, where defamation, the IT Act and cyber crime provisions are invoked at will for any criticism against individuals in the government or the ruling party. Complaints being filed by the TVK cadre and the *suo motu* action of the police targeting dissenters could run the administration off the rails. The alacrity with which the government is ready to treat allegations against Ministers as criminal misinformation or defamation, rather than let them take the natural course of civil suits or political contestation, is disheartening. A new government has the opportunity to rewrite the rules of engagement with the public, to be tolerant of dissent, and not to misdirect the power it is vested with, just to curb opposition. Every government keen on development could be enriched by criticism and dissent articulated on public platforms, if it is willing. It must remember that the restriction of harmful, obscene and indecent content must be balanced with the overwhelming supremacy of freedom of speech.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Recent arrests and police action in Tamil Nadu against individuals for social media posts and public remarks critical of the Chief Minister and Ministers have triggered debate over freedom of speech, democratic accountability, and misuse of criminal law.
- The issue highlights the constitutional balance between Article 19(1)(a) (Freedom of Speech and Expression) and reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2).

Key Points

- Alleged use of criminal defamation and cyber-related provisions against critics.
- Raises concerns over:
 - Freedom of Speech and Expression.
 - Rule of Law.
 - Political neutrality of police.
 - Democratic tolerance of dissent.
- Distinction between:
 - Legitimate criticism (Constitutionally protected).
 - Hate speech, incitement to violence, and public disorder (Subject to reasonable restrictions).

Static Linkages

- Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of Speech and Expression.
- Article 19(2): Reasonable restrictions on grounds such as sovereignty, security of State, public order, decency, morality, contempt of court, defamation, incitement to an offence, and friendly relations with foreign States.
- Article 14: Equality before Law.
- Article 21: Due Process and Personal Liberty.
- Rule of Law (A.V. Dicey).
- Civil vs Criminal Defamation.

Important Supreme Court Judgments

- Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras (1950): Free political discussion is essential for democracy.
- Kedar Nath Singh v. State of Bihar (1962): Mere criticism of the government is not sedition unless it incites violence.
- Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015): Section 66A of the IT Act struck down; distinction between discussion, advocacy, and incitement.
- Subramanian Swamy v. Union of India (2016): Criminal defamation held constitutionally valid.
- Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India (2020): Freedom of speech extends to the internet.

Critical Analysis

Constitutional Concerns

- Repeated arrests may create a chilling effect on free speech.
- Criminal law should not become a substitute for political accountability.
- Democratic governments are expected to tolerate criticism.

Government's Perspective

- Duty to prevent:
 - Hate speech.
 - Defamation.
 - Public disorder.
 - Online misinformation.

Challenges

- Defining the boundary between criticism and unlawful speech.
- Preventing misuse of criminal provisions.
- Ensuring police independence.
- Balancing reputation with free speech.

Way Forward

- Strict adherence to Article 19(2) and Supreme Court guidelines.
- Avoid unnecessary arrests in speech-related cases.
- Prefer civil remedies in ordinary defamation disputes.
- Ensure political neutrality of police.
- Promote constitutional values, tolerance of dissent, and democratic accountability.

Insurance firms using 'ambiguous', 'sloppy' terms to evade liability: SC

Bench observes that insurers exploit the ambiguity to either evade liability which they should rightfully bear, or conversely found themselves burdened with liability they never intended to assume simply because their policy language was sloppy

Aaratrika Bhasumik
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday observed that the practice of insurers drafting "ambiguous" and "sloppy" insurance policies to escape liabilities they ought to bear had caused ordinary policyholders to suffer. The court said such "uncertainty" was also creating hurdles in the timely disposal of motor accident compensation claims.

A Bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and N. Kottiswar Singh observed that insurance companies must use clear and precise language while drafting standard-form insurance contracts to avoid multiple interpretations.

"When the party with all the drafting power writes an ambiguous policy, it is the ordinary policyholder who suffers, insurers have, in many cases, exploited this ambiguity, either to escape liability which they should rightfully bear, or, conversely found themselves burdened with liability they never intended to assume simply because their policy language was sloppy," the Bench observed.

The observations came while the court was hearing an appeal filed by the Oriental Insurance Company against a February 4, 2025 judgment of the Chhatnagar High Court



When the party with all drafting power writes an ambiguous policy, it is the policyholder who suffers, says SC. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

directing it to pay ₹32.67 lakh as compensation in a motor accident claim.

The case arose from an accident involving a vehicle insured with the company, which was carrying passengers on a religious tour to various destinations in Nepal. The vehicle collided with a hill, killing three persons, including the driver, Riaz Khan, and passenger Harish Yadav.

Following the accident, Mr. Yadav's wife, children and mother filed a claim petition before the Motor Accident Claims Tribunal (MACT) seeking compensation of ₹48.99 lakh.

The Tribunal directed the owner of the vehicle to pay the compensation along with interest at 8% per annum from October 22, 2011, the date of institution of the claim petition.

However, the High Court modified the award and held the insurer liable to satisfy the claim instead

of the vehicle owner. The Bench also expressed reservations about the manner in which orders were being passed by MACTs, observing that many were devoid of "adequate and clear reasoning". It said that unless this was addressed, claim petitions would continue to be delayed and appeals would continue to rise.

"In certain cases that have come up before this Court, including the present one, the tone, tenor and extent of the orders passed by the concerned Tribunals has caused us considerable disturbance. In this case, for example, the Tribunal elaborately recorded the submissions and evidence. However, their correlation with the facts of the case, and the effect of this correlation on the ultimate outcome, was lacking," the judgment by Justice Karol said.

The insurance company

had contended that since the accident had occurred outside the territory of India, the policy did not cover the claim. The Bench, however, rejected the contention, holding that if the insurer intended to exclude coverage for accidents occurring outside India, it ought to have "expressly mentioned" so in the policy. It noted that the offending vehicle had been lawfully permitted to travel into Nepal only after the authorities at the international border post were satisfied that all legal requirements had been complied with.

"It should have effectively and clearly communicated the terms of the contract, as the terms are unilaterally drafted by the insurer only. Essentially, 'Cover what you want. Exclude what you want. But make sure you do it clearly. Sloppy drafting could cost you something'..." the Bench said.

To address this lacuna, the Bench advised the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), the regulatory authority for the insurance sector, to consider issuing a master circular standardising cross-border coverage clauses across all motor insurance policies.

The court accordingly directed the insurance company to deposit the claim amount within four weeks and disposed of the appeal.

ment before undertaking inter-country travel.

The court also pointed to a regulatory vacuum governing cross-border insurance coverage. It observed that while the Inter-Country Transport Vehicles Rules, 2021 provide a legal framework for Indian vehicles to travel abroad under valid inter-country permits, they do not clarify whether a domestic insurance policy extends to the country where the vehicle is permitted to operate.

"It appears that there is, as of today, no clear statute, binding precedent or regulatory clarification in force that clarifies the extension of insurance policies for cross-border travel. This uncertainty causes hurdles in deciding motor accident claims in a timely and efficient manner, thereby affecting the claimants the most," the Bench said.

To address this lacuna, the Bench advised the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), the regulatory authority for the insurance sector, to consider issuing a master circular standardising cross-border coverage clauses across all motor insurance policies.

The court accordingly directed the insurance company to deposit the claim amount within four weeks and disposed of the appeal.

Accordingly, the top court directed that if cross-border coverage is excluded, insurance policies must expressly state so and inform policyholders that they would be required to obtain a separate endorsement before undertaking inter-country travel.

"No clarification"

The court also pointed to a regulatory vacuum governing cross-border insurance coverage. It observed that while the Inter-Country Transport Vehicles Rules, 2021 provide a legal framework for Indian vehicles to travel abroad under valid inter-country permits, they do not clarify whether a domestic insurance policy extends to the country where the vehicle is permitted to operate.

- Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority Act, 1999
 - Establishes IRDAI as the insurance regulator.
 - Consumer Protection Act, 2019 Protection against unfair trade practices and deficiency in services.
- Doctrine of Contra Proferentem
 - Ambiguous contractual terms are interpreted against the party drafting the contract.
- Articles 14, 21, 38 & 39A of the Constitution reinforce fairness, access to justice and social welfare.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- The Supreme Court held that ambiguous insurance policy terms should not prejudice policyholders.
- It ruled that if an insurer intends to exclude cross-border motor insurance coverage (e.g., travel to Nepal), such exclusion must be expressly stated in the policy.
- The Court advised IRDAI to issue uniform guidelines on cross-border motor insurance coverage.

Key Points

- Insurance contracts are standard-form contracts, drafted solely by insurers.
- Ambiguous clauses should be interpreted against the insurer (Contra Proferentem principle).
- Courts should interpret insurance policies in a manner that furthers the beneficial object of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988.
- The Court noted the absence of a clear legal/regulatory framework governing cross-border insurance coverage for Indian vehicles.
- IRDAI was advised to standardise policy wording and cross-border coverage clauses.
- The Court also stressed the need for well-reasoned MACT orders to reduce litigation and delays.

Static Linkages

- Motor Vehicles Act, 1988
 - Mandatory third-party insurance.
 - Motor Accident Claims Tribunals (MACT).
 - Social welfare legislation for road accident victims.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Strengthens consumer rights in insurance contracts.
- Promotes plain-language drafting of insurance policies.
- Reduces scope for arbitrary claim rejection.
- Improves certainty in cross-border motor insurance.
- Supports the welfare objective of the Motor Vehicles Act.

Challenges

- No explicit statutory framework for cross-border insurance coverage.
- Lack of uniform insurance policy wording.
- Poorly reasoned MACT orders increase pendency and appeals.
- Possible increase in insurers' compliance costs.

Way Forward

- IRDAI should issue standardised cross-border insurance guidelines.
- Mandate plain-language insurance policies with explicit exclusions.
- Strengthen MACT capacity through judicial training.
- Clarify insurance provisions under the Inter-Country Transport Vehicles Rules, 2021.
- Enhance consumer awareness regarding territorial coverage and endorsements.

Anna Hazare to Sonam Wangchuk, a tale of two fasts — and a democracy

ON MONDAY, protesters marching to Parliament with demands for the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan were met with teargas shells. Then, for the first time in 23 days, the government opened a line of communication with the protesters and talks have reportedly been held with former BJP president and Union health minister JP Nadda. The government's reluctance to engage meaningfully with a movement demanding reform of the country's education system is telling in more ways than one.

A contrasting story unfolded 15 years ago. Anna Hazare, a social agitator since the '90s in Maharashtra, caught everyone's attention when he started a hunger strike on April 5, 2011, in Delhi. The strike ended in just 96 hours when the government agreed to form a joint committee to draft the Jan Lokpal Bill. Hazare's second and longer hunger strike began on August 16 at Delhi's famous Ram-ila Maidan. It ended on August 28, after 12 days, when Parliament passed a law that met his core demands.

Hazare's demand was relatively straightforward: The government should put in place strong anti-corruption measures by creating an independent ombudsman, the Lokpal. In India, corruption is something that many people think everyone else is up to. That's why anti-corruption campaigns often succeed, even though these agitations do not solve the problem completely. With the Mamohan Singh government beset by a series of scams, or rather allegations about scams, Hazare's

agitation struck the right chord. The impact of his fast was significantly amplified when television channels began broadcasting demonstration live and former police officer Kiren Bedi and yoga guru Baba Ramdev joined the movement.

The real power behind the Anna movement, though, stayed away from the spotlight. The RSS, with its well-organised network, was believed to be gathering support for the movement. Some socialists and those on the left — Medha Patkar, Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan, for instance — did support Hazare. However, the 2014 general elections showed that the biggest winner of the Anna movement was the BJP.

The Mamohan Singh government also played a role, as it couldn't quite grasp the intricacies of the Anna movement to begin with. Once it got its act together, the UPA government enlisted the help of two important individuals, in addition to Prashant Bhushan and A.K. Antony, its "operative" in end to Hazare's fast. These individuals — former Maharashtra chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh and Union minister Sarangi, a former NCBARD chief and IAS official from the state — were better equipped to deal with the situation than Mukherjee and Antony.

Deshmukh and Sarangi were able to achieve their goal. But by then, it was too late. The genie was out of the bottle.

Sonam Wangchuk's ongoing fast is distinct from Hazare's agitation on two counts. While what Hazare wanted was theoretical and abstract, Wangchuk's demand is grounded in a more concrete real-



GIRISH KUBER

ity. He seeks the removal of Dharmendra Pradhan, a key figure in the Narendra Modi government. The contrast between their demands highlights the stark difference in political acumen between the two. Compared to the easily pliable, politically well-connected Hazare, the agitator who is demanding the reform of the education system is a person of stronger convictions. Fulfilling Hazare's demands — and eventually useless — demand was much easier than what Wangchuk is seeking.

Two, Wangchuk has, at best, had sporadic backing from the Opposition. During Hazare's movement, the then main opposition party, the BJP, saw an opportunity to expose the chaotic Mamohan Singh government. The Opposition today, in contrast, is showing signs of inertia. One reason could be that it is divided and lacks a cohesive strategy to challenge the Modi government. No party sees an incentive in Wangchuk's success. Hazare's victory had a direct beneficiary: The BJP was better placed to capitalise on the anti-government sentiments ignited by him since it was the sole occupant of the opposition space and the only challenger to the Congress-led coalition at the Centre.

The political vacuum in Wangchuk's fast was filled by the youth who travelled to Delhi from across India to extend support to the cause. Governments and political leaders have an uncanny capacity to sense the significance of scale, whether during protests or a natural disaster. The magnitude of the situation often determines the

mines the government's response. The groundswell at Jantar Mantar ultimately compelled the government to break its silence. It decided to engage with protesters. This is more of a success of the country's impatient youth than the majority, who preferred to remain indifferent.

This political reality raises an important question: Does society today judge success and failure in politics based on election results? Almost the entire country seemed to be united in supporting the Anna movement. Fifteen years ago, several representatives from the entertainment industry could stand up and express their disagreement with the government. Where are these voices now? The media, too, wasn't as vocal as it was during the Anna movement, which also had the backing of sections of industry. India lies under the current government, in contrast, is much subdued. It's quite striking how, in just about 15 years, the country's belly-bulge and threat to democracy has become so quiet.

The resolution to the questions posed by Wangchuk will determine whether our democracy reclaims its voice or we remain trapped in deafening silence. The country's youth has shown an alternative democratic path. Wangchuk's fast and developments that followed are a signal to the government as well — it may have enormous power to bend and break the Opposition but it cannot govern indefinitely by ignoring public sentiment, and there are certain things beyond the power and reach of central agencies.

The writer is editor, Lokmat

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Recent protests demanding reforms in the education sector led to police action and subsequent dialogue between the Union Government and protesters.
- The developments have renewed debate on constitutional rights, democratic dissent, and the balance between Fundamental Rights and public order.

Key Points

- Peaceful protest is protected under Article 19(1)(a) (Freedom of Speech and Expression) and Article 19(1)(b) (Right to Assemble Peacefully).
- These rights are subject to reasonable restrictions under Articles 19(2) and 19(3) in the interests of:
 - Sovereignty and Integrity of India
 - Security of the State
 - Public Order
 - Decency and Morality
- Article 21 guarantees protection of life and personal liberty during state action.
- Democratic governance requires balancing civil liberties with maintenance of public order.

Static Linkages

- Articles 19(1)(a), 19(1)(b), 19(2), 19(3), 21, 14
- Rule of Law
- Constitutional Morality
- Doctrine of Proportionality
- Reasonable Restrictions under Fundamental Rights
- Role of Civil Society and Pressure Groups
- Landmark Judgment:
 - Amit Sahni v. Commissioner of Police (2020): Peaceful protest is a constitutional right but public spaces cannot be occupied indefinitely.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Strengthens participatory democracy.
- Enhances government accountability.
- Facilitates policy feedback through citizen participation.

Challenges

- Balancing individual liberty with public order.
- Excessive use of force may affect constitutional freedoms.
- Politicisation of protests may dilute genuine public concerns.
- Lack of institutional grievance redressal can intensify public unrest.

Way Forward

- Institutionalise stakeholder consultation before major policy decisions.
- Ensure police action follows the principle of necessity and proportionality.
- Strengthen grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Promote continuous dialogue between government and civil society.
- Uphold Fundamental Rights while maintaining public order.

Anti-defection law needs drastic changes



DESH DEEPAK VERMA

AS PARLIAMENT'S Monsoon Session commences, the red carpets of the Rajya Sabha will have some different shades cast upon them by MPs who originally belonged to one shade of political party but now belong to another. The arithmetic of the House will also change because of these large-scale defections and realignments.

The Opposition predictably attributes these defections to horse-trading, political inducements and the fear of investigative agencies. The ruling party, on the other hand, argues that many legislators have merely chosen to free themselves from autocratic or family-centric political organisations. There may be elements of truth in both narratives.

Amid this exchange of accusations and counter-accusations, a more fundamental issue gets overlooked — the continuing failure of India's anti-defection law to contain the very political opportunism it was enacted to curb.

The anti-defection law was introduced through the Fifty-second Constitutional Amendment in 1985 by incorporating the Tenth Schedule into the Constitution. Its principal objective was to curb the political instability caused by frequent defections.

The Ninety-first Constitutional Amendment of 2003 further tightened the law by abolishing the exemption from disqualification for a bloc comprising at least one-third of the members of a legislature party. Thereafter, only a merger supported by at least two-thirds of the members of a legislature party remained eligible for this exemption.

The experience of implementing the anti-defection law, even after these amendments, has been far from satisfactory. Under the Tenth Schedule, the authority to decide disqualification petitions rests with the presiding officers of the respective Houses — the Speaker in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, and the Chairmen in the Rajya Sabha and Legislative Councils. While the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha is mandated to resign from his or her parent party, this is not obligatory for the Speakers. This arrangement, rightly or wrongly, inevitably gives rise to questions about institutional im-

partiality. Presiding officers have delayed decisions on disqualification petitions for months and years, and at times, for the entire tenure of the House. The Supreme Court has repeatedly observed that such petitions should ordinarily be decided within three months, and some Chairmen of the Rajya Sabha have echoed the same expectation. Yet deliberate procedural delays have often rendered the law ineffective.

Paradoxically, the stricter provisions have also not eliminated defections. Instead, political efforts now focus on engineering defections on a larger scale, enough to satisfy the two-thirds requirement for a merger. The phenomenon has now become more organised, accompanied by greater political bargaining and inducements. Thus, the anti-defection law has, in practice, become an instrument for escalating defections rather than preventing them.

What is the solution? It needs more drastic and fundamental constitutional changes. We would need a law to automatically end, on the date of resignation, the tenure of any elected representative who resigns from the political party on whose ticket he or she was elected. The individual could seek a fresh mandate, and if he or she enjoys public support independent of party affiliation, there should be no difficulty in securing re-election — either as an independent candidate or as another party's nominee, in the vacated seat or any other. This would shift the ultimate authority to decide a defecting legislator's right to continue in the House from party managers and presiding officers to the electorate.

Critics may argue that such a provision would discourage genuine dissent within political parties and inhibit independent thinking. That concern, however, appears overstated. Legislators would remain entirely free to disagree with their party, resign from it and seek a fresh mandate. What the amendment would discourage is not dissent but the retention of an elected office after abandoning the political platform on which that office was secured.

The writer is former secretary general, Rajya Sabha, Parliament of India

We would need a law to automatically end, on the date of resignation, the tenure of any elected representative who resigns from the political party on whose ticket he or she was elected

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Large-scale defections and political realignments ahead of the Monsoon Session of Parliament have reignited the debate on the effectiveness of the Anti-Defection Law (Tenth Schedule).
- The issue highlights concerns over delays in deciding disqualification petitions and the increasing use of the two-thirds merger provision to bypass the law.

Key Points

- Anti-Defection Law
 - Introduced through the 52nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1985 by inserting the Tenth Schedule.
 - Objective: Prevent political defections and ensure stability of elected governments.
- Grounds for Disqualification
 - Voluntarily giving up membership of a political party.
 - Voting/abstaining against the party whip without permission.
 - Independent member joining a political party after election.
 - Nominated member joining a political party after six months.
- 91st Constitutional Amendment Act, 2003
 - Deleted exemption for one-third split.
 - Only a merger supported by at least two-thirds of the legislature party is exempt from disqualification.

- Decision-Making Authority
 - Speaker (Lok Sabha/Legislative Assembly) and Chairman (Rajya Sabha/Legislative Council).
 - Their decisions are subject to judicial review.
- Important Supreme Court Judgments
 - Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillhu (1992): Upheld the Tenth Schedule; Speaker's decision is reviewable by courts.
 - Keisham Meghachandra Singh (2020): Disqualification petitions should ordinarily be decided within 3 months.
- Committee Recommendation
 - 170th Law Commission Report (1999): Suggested limiting the whip to votes affecting government stability.
 - Dinesh Goswami Committee (1990): Recommended disqualification only for votes affecting the survival of the government.

Static Linkages

- Tenth Schedule
- Articles 102(2) & 191(2)
- 52nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1985
- 91st Constitutional Amendment Act, 2003
- Judicial Review (Basic Structure Doctrine)
- Office of Speaker and Chairman
- Party Whip
- Parliamentary Democracy

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Prevents political instability.
- Preserves the electoral mandate.
- Reduces unethical political defections.
- Strengthens responsible government.

Challenges

- Delay in deciding disqualification petitions.
- Speaker's perceived political bias.
- Two-thirds merger provision facilitates mass defections.
- Restricts legislative independence through excessive use of the party whip.
- Encourages political bargaining instead of ideological politics.

Way Forward

- Prescribe a constitutional/statutory time limit for deciding disqualification petitions.
- Transfer adjudicatory power to an independent tribunal or the Election Commission.
- Restrict the whip to confidence motions, Money Bills, and no-confidence motions.
- Strengthen internal democracy in political parties.
- Ensure greater transparency in mergers and resignations.
- Consider requiring defecting legislators to seek a fresh electoral mandate.

Can't have sabka vishwas with tear gas and lathi

THE ABUNDANT images on Monday — of thousands of mostly young and mostly peaceful protestors facing barricades and lathi charge and tear gas shells in the heart of the national capital — were stark and dispiriting. They indict the government. The protestors were reportedly responding to the call of the satirical online platform, the Cockroach Janta Party, to march to Parliament. The CJP has been conducting a sit-in protest since June 20 at Jantar Mantar, from where education and environment activist Sonam Wangchuk, fasting since June 28, was taken to a hospital, Saturday, forcibly. But the protestors were arguably responding to more than one fast or one platform. They were rallying behind the issue that is being highlighted — the urgent need to reform a broken education system, beset with exam leaks, delays and irregularities, which leads, in turn, to swelling the ranks of the unemployed. In a country of the young, the recent episode of the NEET cancellation and retest has touched a raw nerve, sparking larger anxieties about the shape of an uncertain future, and lack of readiness to meet its challenges. The Centre looks harsh and unyielding towards the young protestors, and insensitive on an issue that ripples widely. It kept its back turned, eyes wide shut. It took three weeks to break its silence with a meeting on Monday between Minister J P Nadda and spokespersons of the CJP. It is, of course, far from clear whether the meeting translates into reform and accountability.

On the interlinked matters of *shiksha* and *berozgari*, education and unemployment, the government needs to recognise that it cannot keep kicking the can down the road. It must acknowledge, also, that citizens have the right to place demands on it, to disagree with it and to protest peacefully. In letter and spirit, the Constitution guarantees citizens both the freedom to speak and the space to be heard. Over the last 12 years or so, however, the government's instinct has been to distrust and demonise those who express dissent, to reflexively label them "anti-national". It favours a top-down, one-way communication that does not involve listening and responding.

On Monday, the march of the protestors was to Parliament, the highest forum of deliberative democracy, where elected representatives take up the people's issues. The concerns highlighted at Jantar Mantar must find their way into the House eventually — that is the legitimate trajectory. A government that has, through its serial electoral successes, underlined its connect with the people can ill afford to stand in their way when they demand a hearing in between elections. It is still not too late, a beginning has been made towards a dialogue with the protestors. In days to come, the government must make amends by building on it.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Recent protests in New Delhi highlighted concerns over:
 - Recurring competitive examination paper leaks.
 - Delays in recruitment examinations and appointments.
 - Rising youth unemployment.
 - Demand for systemic reforms in the education and recruitment process.
- The issue also revived debate on the constitutional right to peaceful protest and the State's response to public demonstrations.

Key Points

- Examination irregularities undermine merit-based recruitment.
- Delayed recruitment affects employment generation and governance efficiency.
- Peaceful protests are an important democratic mechanism for public participation.
- Government accountability and institutional transparency are essential for maintaining public trust.
- Parliament remains the constitutional forum for addressing citizens' grievances.

Static Linkages

- Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of Speech and Expression.
- Article 19(1)(b): Right to Assemble Peacefully and Without Arms.

- Article 19(2) & 19(3): Reasonable Restrictions.
- Article 14: Equality before Law.
- Article 16: Equality of Opportunity in Public Employment.
- Article 21: Right to Life (expanded to include dignity and fair procedure through judicial interpretation).
- Rule of Law.
- Parliamentary Democracy.
- Constitutional Morality.
- Good Governance: Transparency, Accountability and Responsiveness.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Protects democratic participation through peaceful dissent.
- Highlights need for transparent recruitment systems.
- Reinforces accountability of public institutions.

Challenges

- Frequent examination leaks reduce institutional credibility.
- Recruitment delays increase educated unemployment.
- Excessive restrictions on peaceful protests may affect democratic freedoms.
- Weak grievance-redress mechanisms reduce public confidence.

Constitutional Dimension

- Right to protest is protected under Article 19, subject to reasonable restrictions.
- State must balance public order with fundamental freedoms.
- Democratic governance requires dialogue alongside maintenance of law and order.

Way Forward

- Strengthen digital security and auditing of examinations.
- Ensure time-bound recruitment and vacancy filling.
- Implement stricter anti-paper leak mechanisms.
- Improve transparency through independent oversight.
- Strengthen grievance-redress systems for aspirants.
- Promote institutional dialogue with stakeholders while safeguarding constitutional rights.