



DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS

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**CIVILS WITH AKASH
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

Death toll rises to 41 as 'worst floods in 60 years' wreak havoc in Assam

Rahul Karmakar
GUWAHATI

The Assam government on Wednesday said the ongoing wave of floods in some eastern districts of the State has been the worst in 60 years, affecting more than 6.5 lakh people and claiming 41 lives in less than a month.

According to a late-night bulletin by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), floodwaters claimed the lives of 10 people across five districts in the last 24 hours.

Meanwhile, the number of flood-affected districts reduced from 16 to 11 in this period.

"The floods have affected 6,53,164 people across 939 villages and crops on 24,897.27 hectares of land," an ASDMA spokesperson said.

Earlier, replying to a brief discussion on the flood situation in the State Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pijush Ha-



People carrying a bicycle and other belongings wade through a waterlogged road in Golaghat district, Assam, on Wednesday as they move to a safer place after heavy rain inundated several villages. AP

zarika said the disaster in Sivasagar, Charaideo, and Jorhat districts, "which rarely experience floods of this magnitude", has been unprecedented. He said the authorities in these districts were caught off-guard after a cloudburst in the adjoining Nagaland

triggered a massive flow of water. The cloudburst in Nagaland's Mon district caused multiple landslides, killing at least nine people on July 19. "These areas are witnessing such a devastating flood in more than 60 years. This is a natural calamity of an unprecedented

ed scale," Mr. Hazarika said. Meanwhile, the India Meteorological Department predicted moderate to heavy rainfall along with thunderstorms at isolated places in Guwahati and other districts over the next four days.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Assam witnessed one of its worst floods in the last 60 years, particularly in the eastern districts of Sivasagar, Charaideo and Jorhat, which are generally less flood-prone.
- According to the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA):
 - 6.53 lakh people affected.
 - 939 villages inundated.
 - 24,897.27 hectares of crop area damaged.
 - 41 deaths reported within one month.
- The floods were triggered by a cloudburst in Mon district of Nagaland, causing sudden runoff, flash floods and landslides.
- The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast continued moderate to heavy rainfall, indicating persistent flood risk.

Key Points

- State: Assam.
- Worst affected districts: Sivasagar, Charaideo, Jorhat.
- Cause: Cloudburst-induced flash floods + intense Southwest Monsoon rainfall.
- Affected population: 6.53 lakh.
- Affected villages: 939.
- Crop loss: 24,897.27 hectares.
- Deaths: 41.
- Monitoring agency: Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA).
- Weather forecasting agency: India Meteorological Department (IMD).

Important Static Facts

- Assam is India's most flood-prone State, with nearly 40% of its geographical area vulnerable to floods (Rashtriya Barh Aayog).
- The Brahmaputra Basin receives very high monsoon rainfall and carries one of the highest sediment loads in the world.

Major reasons for recurring floods:

- Heavy monsoon rainfall.
- Young Himalayan geology.
- High silt deposition.
- Braided river channels.
- Riverbank erosion.
- Sudden runoff from Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Bhutan.

Static Linkages

- Cloudburst
 - Localised extreme rainfall exceeding 100 mm/hour over a small area.
 - Causes flash floods and landslides.
- Brahmaputra River
 - Origin: Chemayungdung Glacier (Tibet).
 - Known as Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet.
 - Enters India as Siang (Dihang) in Arunachal Pradesh.
 - Flows through Assam before entering Bangladesh as Jamuna.
- Major Tributaries
 - Subansiri, Lohit, Dibang, Manas, Jia Bharali, Dhansiri, Kopili
- Disaster Management Act, 2005
 - Establishes NDMA, SDMA and DDMA.
 - Provides legal framework for disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response.
- Flood Forecasting
 - Central Water Commission (CWC) issues flood forecasts.
 - IMD provides rainfall forecasts and weather warnings.
- Sendai Framework (2015–2030)
 - Global framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.
 - India is a signatory.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Indicates increasing frequency of extreme weather events associated with climate change.
- Highlights vulnerability of districts previously considered less flood-prone.
- Demonstrates the importance of river basin-level disaster planning.

Challenges

- High sedimentation in the Brahmaputra.
- Riverbank erosion and shifting channels.
- Encroachment of wetlands and floodplains.
- Limited interstate coordination in upstream catchments.
- Large agricultural and livelihood losses.
- Increasing intensity of extreme rainfall events.

Way Forward

- Adopt Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) for the Brahmaputra basin.
- Strengthen real-time flood forecasting through IMD and CWC.
- Expand Doppler Weather Radar and Automatic Weather Stations.
- Restore wetlands and floodplains as natural buffers.
- Promote climate-resilient infrastructure and agriculture.
- Enhance community-based disaster preparedness and early warning dissemination.

Supreme Court-appointed Aravali panel's consultation process excludes rural people, say environmentalists

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Environmentalists and activists have raised concerns about the Supreme Court-appointed committee inviting written feedback on issues related to the Aravali hills and ranges through email or Google forms specifically designed for the purpose.

They have argued that the online outreach mechanism excludes rural communities, the most directly impacted by decisions on the Aravallis and which may not be literate and technology-savvy.

Formed on May 25, the high-powered committee has been tasked with conducting an independent review of the Centre's report on the definition and deli-



Fragile nature: There has been a demand that the committee members visit the villages in the Aravali belt. FILE PHOTO

neation of the Aravali hill range. The committee has to submit its report by August 31.

'Not for rural people'

In a statement, Kusum Rawat, member of the pan-India Adivasi Samavay Manch Bharat, said, "The online submission process announced by the high-po-

wered committee is not designed for the rural people. A villager in the Aravali belt cannot navigate a complex email address or Google Form, let alone ensure it reaches the right inbox without a typographical error." Ms. Rawat added that the committee should paste public notices in local languages at panchayat

bhawans, community halls, government schools and anganwadis in Aravali districts across five States.

There has also been a concern about the 21-day window for sending feedback, as environmentalists and activists claim that the time period is not sufficient to communicate concerns in a meaningful way.

'Short deadline'

Lokesh Bhiwani, founder of Stand With Nature, said in a statement, "Twenty-one days is an entirely inadequate window to hear from the diverse communities living deep within the Aravali belt. Getting these communities to participate in any meaningful way will be a manual, time-intensive process - there are no shortcuts, and decent cov-

erage of voices within this timeline is simply not possible," he added.

There has also been a demand that the committee's members visit the villages in the Aravali belt.

'Flouting of rules'

Diwan Singh, convener of the Ridge Bachao Andolan, said in a statement, "Most of the licensed mining leases running today across the States of Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat are blatantly flouting rules and norms, causing deep damage to the health and livelihoods of local communities. No written submission can capture the everyday suffering being endured by the people dependent on the good health of the Aravalis for their existence," he added.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- The Supreme Court-appointed High-Powered Committee (HPC) has invited public feedback on the definition and delineation of the Aravali Hill Range through email and Google Forms.
- The Committee was constituted on 25 May 2026 to independently review the Central Government's report on Aravali delineation and submit its report by 31 August 2026.
- Environmental groups have raised concerns over:
 - Digital-only consultation, excluding rural and tribal communities.
 - 21-day consultation period, considered inadequate.
 - Demand for Gram Sabha consultations and field visits before final recommendations.

Key Points

- The exercise seeks to establish a scientific and legally accepted boundary of the Aravali Hill Range.
- Accurate delineation is crucial for:
 - Environmental protection.
 - Regulation of mining activities.
 - Land-use planning.
 - Judicial enforcement against encroachments.
- Civil society has demanded:
 - Offline consultations in local languages.
 - Village-level public hearings.
 - Wider stakeholder participation.
- The Aravali ecosystem extends across Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat and parts of Uttar Pradesh.

Static Linkages

- One of the oldest fold mountain systems in the world (Precambrian origin).
- Extends about 700 km from Delhi to Gujarat.
- Highest Peak: Guru Shikhar (Mount Abu, Rajasthan).

- Acts as a barrier against the eastward expansion of the Thar Desert.
- Forms an important watershed between the Indus and Ganga river systems.
- Rich in minerals such as copper, zinc, lead, marble, granite and limestone.
- Supports wildlife including Leopard, Sloth Bear, Striped Hyena and Indian Wolf.
- Protected through provisions of:
 - Environment (Protection) Act, 1986
 - Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 (now Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980)
 - Biological Diversity Act, 2002

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Scientific delineation can strengthen conservation.
- Helps curb illegal mining and encroachments.
- Supreme Court monitoring improves institutional accountability.
- Public consultation supports participatory governance.

Concerns

- Digital consultation limits participation of rural communities.
- Short consultation period reduces effective stakeholder engagement.
- Boundary ambiguities may weaken environmental protection.
- Balancing developmental needs with ecological conservation remains challenging.

Way Forward

- Conduct Gram Sabha-based offline consultations.
- Use GIS, remote sensing and ground verification for delineation.
- Extend consultation period for meaningful participation.
- Strengthen inter-state coordination for Aravali conservation.
- Strict enforcement against illegal mining and encroachments.
- Promote landscape restoration through community participation.

The cockroach dilemma facing India's political parties

How does the cockroach protest alter India's political landscape? A considerable section of those opposed to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sees hope in the mobilisation triggered by the self-deprecating cockroach activists. Some even believe that political parties – particularly the Congress – should fall in line with the outfit that calls itself the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), which took its name from a remark by a judge of the Supreme Court of India who likened India's disgruntled youth to cockroaches. An opposing view, expressed as hope within the BJP and concern within the Congress, is that this protest could cannibalise the latter. AAP (the Aam Aadmi Party) finished the Congress in Delhi and Punjab. Let's see where the CJP ends the Congress' Devendra Kumar, an election strategist who works with the BJP, posted on X.

The Opposition parties are not unified in their approach to the cockroach protest. Differences exist both between and within parties. The Samajwadi Party and the Left believe that joining the protesters could expand the Opposition space, while within the Congress, opinions are divided over whether playing second fiddle to the protesters would be useful. There are also voices within the Left that favour a more cautious approach. On July 26, the Congress attempted to seize the moment by staging a dharna outside Prime Minister Narendra Modi's residence.



Varghese K. George

farmers' protests of 2020-21, both of which took place during the second term of the Modi government belong to one category. Before these came the Anna Hazare-Arvind Kejriwal anti-corruption agitation of 2011, followed by the Nriehaya rape and murder protests of 2012. There is no way to precisely decipher the social composition of these movements, but some broad features are worth noting. The farmers' protests were driven largely by relatively prosperous farmers in a narrow belt around Delhi. The anti-CAA protests came to be framed largely as a Muslim issue. An urban middle class that considers itself apolitical took out candles for Anna's movement and its call to "hang the corrupt" at Vijay Chowk, as it was put, but remained silent during the farmers' protests and possibly turned against the anti-CAA movement. By then, its apolitical had, in many cases, turned into outright communalism. The apolitical middle class periodically finds purpose in declaring all politics illegitimate and undesirable, rallying instead around movements that usually reflect immediate personal grievances – price rise in 2011, question-paper leaks, or the severe income and opportunity stress confronting young people in 2020. Examination irregularities are only the trigger; protesters are agitated by the precarity starting them in the face.

The farmers forced the government to withdraw the controversial farm laws, while the CAA protests fizzled out. Both protests had limited political impact nationally in subsequent elections. They represented sectional interests that the BJP could isolate as the other and amplify its own politics. It is precisely on this point that youth protesters pose an unprecedented challenge to the BJP and an opportunity for the Opposition.

CJP protesters represent a horizontal segment of Indian society, concentrated in the BJP strongholds of the Hindi heartland, where the demographic bulge is manifesting more as disenchantment than hope. It is a segment that cannot easily be cornered as a sectional interest or labelled in any other manner easily by the BJP. It is socially diverse but largely located within the young, Hindu-Hindi spectrum, preempting any communal polarisation on the issue.

Anti-corruption slogans were a shell for movements such as the Gujarat Navnirman movement (1974), the JP Movement (1974), and the Anna movement, in which diverse interest groups coalesced to undermine the Congress system.

The difference now
Whether the same pattern of mobilisation that helped bring the BJP and its Hindutva politics to power can also undermine it remains an open question. At its peak in 2019, the BJP secured about 37% of the national vote. At any given point, more than 60% of Indians do not vote for the BJP. If a protest remains confined to a

particular segment of society or a particular region of the country, the BJP remains largely unconcerned. It may even seek a counter-consolidation, as it did during the farmers' and anti-CAA protests. There is considerable dynamism in the voting preferences of people. The BJP may have lost many of its earlier supporters since 2014 while gaining new ones elsewhere. The ideological appeal of Hindutva remains intact, but the party is also keen to improve its vote-to-seat ratio through a fresh delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies ahead of the next general election (in 2026).

In the BJP's scheme of things, it would rather have the CJP in the headlines than Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. But its toolkits for dealing with protests, which worked earlier, are less effective now, partly because the BJP is dealing with a new generation and its collective psyche. The 20-year-old protester of today was only eight when Mr. Modi became Prime Minister in 2014. It was their parents' generation that cheered the arrival of the BJP then; their children are now shaking off the burden of their political inheritance. If it was the WhatsApp generation that fuelled the rise of what I term Hindutva 2.0 under Mr. Modi, it is the Instagram generation that is challenging it now. All this makes it possible that this apolitical, sporadic outburst of public anger could expand into a mass mobilisation with sufficient critical weight to unsettle the BJP. What is clear, however, is that the cockroach protesters alone have no capacity to achieve that. That is where the role of the Opposition, particularly the Congress, becomes critical.

A new battleground

The BJP and its Jan Sangh predecessors were able to turn popular mobilisations such as the JP movement and the Anna movement to their advantage and against the Congress, while leaving smaller political gains to figures such as V.P. Singh and Mr. Kejriwal along the way. This is the first time that a comparable phenomenon is being tested against the BJP itself – a party with a stronger ideology, greater organisational discipline, ruthless political determination, and a willingness to deploy state power to its advantage.

The long arc of such apolitical protests has, so far, bent towards the erosion of public trust in the liberal, secular, and unity middle ground of Indian politics. In that sense, the cockroach protest is more a symptom than a remedy for India's democratic disarray. Can the Congress do to the BJP what the BJP has done to the Congress over the years through apolitical protests? That is the question before us. Both the BJP and the Opposition face risks as well as opportunities in these protests.

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- Gujarat Navnirman Movement (1974) – Student-led anti-corruption movement.
- JP Movement (1974-75) – Mass mobilisation demanding "Total Revolution."
- Anna Hazare Anti-Corruption Movement (2011) – Led to emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party.
- Anti-CAA Protests (2019-20) – Mobilisation against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.
- Farmers' Protest (2020-21) – Resulted in repeal of the three farm laws.

Static Linkages

- Article 19(1)(a) – Freedom of Speech and Expression.
- Article 19(1)(b) – Right to Assemble Peacefully.
- Article 19(1)(c) – Freedom to Form Associations.
- Articles 19(2) & 19(3) – Reasonable Restrictions.
- Pressure Groups and Interest Groups in a democracy.
- Civil Society and Democratic Participation.
- Role of Opposition in Parliamentary Democracy.
- Electoral Behaviour and Political Participation.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Reflects increasing youth aspirations and employment concerns.
- Strengthens democratic participation through peaceful mobilisation.
- Can improve government responsiveness to public grievances.

Challenges

- Absence of a clear organisational structure or policy agenda.
- Risk of political co-option by competing parties.
- Social media-driven mobilisation may lack long-term sustainability.
- Protest movements without institutional reforms may have limited policy impact.

Constitutional Dimension

- Peaceful protest is protected under Article 19, subject to reasonable restrictions relating to public order, sovereignty, and integrity.

Way Forward

- Ensure transparent and time-bound public recruitment.
- Strengthen mechanisms to prevent examination paper leaks.
- Expand employment generation through labour-intensive sectors.
- Institutionalise youth consultation in policymaking.
- Protect constitutional rights while maintaining public order.
- Encourage constructive dialogue between government and civil society.

The politics of public anger
Occasional outbursts of public anger, frustration, and resentment against the government of the day are a normal feature of democratic societies. Whether such sporadic outbursts turn into political mobilisation with electoral consequences is a different question. A protest movement can lead to diametrically opposite outcomes depending on the circumstances. Public anger can be consolidated and galvanised into dramatic electoral outcomes; it can also be diffused through protest, averting or diverting political change.

The Kejriwal-Anna movement of 2011 consolidated public anger against the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance and in favour of the Narendra Modi-led BJP. The Congress bore the brunt of public anger then. Now, the party fears that popular resistance against the ruling BJP, which it believes is snowballing, could be scattered by an apolitical mobilisation without any clear programme or organisation. Those in the Opposition who want to ride with the cockroach protest believe that the protesters are taking aim at the government, and that this sentiment can and should be politicised and amplified through better coordination with them.

Referring at least three past instances of self-proclaimed apolitical mobilisation may be helpful. The protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019-20 and the

A movement led by a new generation challenges the BJP's dominance and reshapes the Opposition's calculations

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- A youth-led protest movement known as the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) emerged after a Supreme Court judge allegedly referred to disgruntled youth as "cockroaches."
- The movement is centred on issues such as unemployment, examination paper leaks, delayed recruitments, and declining employment opportunities.
- It has sparked debate on whether apolitical social movements can influence electoral politics and reshape political alignments.

Key Points

Nature of the Movement

- Predominantly youth-led and issue-based.
- Focuses on:

- Unemployment
- Recruitment delays
- Examination irregularities
- Economic insecurity

- Socially diverse and concentrated largely in the Hindi-speaking belt.
- Unlike many previous protests, it is not based on religion, caste, or occupation.

Political Significance

- Highlights growing youth dissatisfaction with employment and governance.
- Creates opportunities as well as challenges for both the ruling party and the Opposition.
- Demonstrates the increasing role of social media-driven political mobilisation among the younger generation.

Historical Linkages

India must lead in securing the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb

In the heels of the Strait of Hormuz crisis comes the new threat – a Strait of Bab el-Mandeb crisis. On July 16, Reuters reported that Iran had instructed the Houthis to close the Strait (which is between Yemen and the Horn of Africa) if the United States attacked Iran's power plants.

Whether the Houthis have the capacity to threaten the Strait or whether this is part of Iran's signalling to the U.S. is secondary. What is important is that this represents a risk to one-third of India's entire trade.

Revisiting 2024

We have been here before. When the Gaza war started in October 2023, the Ansarallah group in Yemen, also known as the Houthis, claimed solidarity with the Palestinians and launched drones and missiles at Israel. From November 2023 to March 2024, the Houthis targeted at least 40 vessels in the Red Sea, claiming that the vessels were linked to or bound for Israel.

In response, the U.S., together with allies including Singapore and Sri Lanka, launched Operation Prosperity Guardian (December 2023) to ensure "freedom of navigation" in the Red Sea. This was followed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2722 (2024), which was adopted in January 2024. Israel also carried out unilateral strikes against the Houthis. The Indian Navy rescued the crew of a British tanker after it was set on fire (January 26-27, 2024). By the time the U.S. declared a ceasefire in May 2025, the Houthis had been weakened, but much of the damage had already been done.

Marine insurance companies tend to be highly risk-averse. With over 90% of the world's shipping insured by just 12 protection and indemnity (P&I) clubs, shipowners have limited room to negotiate. Between November 2023 and March 2024, at least 2,000 ships avoided the Suez Canal and instead sailed around the Cape of Good



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Hope. This delayed critical imports to India. Global shipping routes effectively reverted to what was being done 170 years ago. Egypt lost a quarter of the Suez Canal's revenue. By July 2024, Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat had filed for bankruptcy.

This time around, the situation is more unpredictable. With U.S. forces in the region focused on Iran, it is unclear whether they will seek to secure the Red Sea as they did before.

Even in 2024, when India-bound ships were attacked by the Houthis, New Delhi had to lean directly on Tehran to bring the attacks to a halt. But that was a different time for India-Iran ties. Meanwhile, the UN Security Council is more divided today than ever before, and even if it manages to call for "freedom of navigation" in the Red Sea, it is unlikely to pass a resolution approving a force to implement that call. China is also likely to again take a unilateral approach to protecting its shipping in the Red Sea through quiet pro-gas with the Houthis.

If the Houthis resume attacks on shipping in the Strait, the impact on India's economy – which is already reeling from the Strait of Hormuz crisis – would be dire. While India has now ordered that no Indian mariner be deployed on ships bound to or from the Strait of Hormuz, extending the same restriction to a busy route such as the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb would not be easy and would adversely affect the safety and welfare of thousands of Indian seafarers.

What India should do

In 2024, France stayed out of a U.S.-led operation to guard its role in mediating between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon. Those conditions no longer exist. However, France and Japan – two countries that need shipping lanes in the Red Sea for their connectivity with Asia and Europe respectively – maintain bases in Djibouti, perched on the Red Sea. Their navies have also

conducted joint drills with the Indian Navy, which creates an opportunity for India to pre-empt a recurrence of the events of 2024.

India therefore needs to pro-actively build a naval taskforce in collaboration with France and Japan to deter attacks on shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb.

India would also do well to engage Egypt and Saudi Arabia. They had refused to join the alliance against the Houthis in 2024, given their own stance on Gaza. This time, with their economies at stake, they may not stand by. On July 20, the Houthis announced a "maritime embargo" on Saudi ships, seen as a threat against their transit through the Bab el-Mandeb. India needs to engage with these nations proactively to help secure the Red Sea, from the Suez to Bab el-Mandeb, while keeping its other partners in the region informed.

A rules-based maritime response

It needs to be emphasised that this would be a theatre-specific "Trade Protection Task Force" of navies, rather than a strategic alliance. In addition to ships and personnel, the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region hosted by India could provide the necessary maritime domain awareness, while France and Japan could complement these efforts with on-ground logistical support. The constituent navies could agree on joint rules of engagement in response to any hostile attacks. They could provide security cover or escorts requested by commercial and civilian vessels transiting the Strait, especially those bound for Europe, India, or Japan. The task force would serve as a lasting demonstration of India's resolve to ensure "respect for maritime rules and norms" as part of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).

India has both the responsibility and the capability to prevent the Bab el-Mandeb from becoming a literal "Gate of Tears" this time.

- Over 2,000 ships diverted via the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transit time and freight costs.

India's Response

- Indian Navy deployed warships under Mission Deployed.
- Conducted anti-piracy, escort and rescue operations.
- India follows the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision to ensure maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region.

Static Linkages

- Bab el-Mandeb → Red Sea ↔ Gulf of Aden.
- Strait of Hormuz → Persian Gulf ↔ Gulf of Oman.
- Strait of Malacca → Indian Ocean ↔ Pacific Ocean.
- UNCLOS, 1982 – Transit passage through international straits.
- Maritime Anti-Piracy Act, 2022.
- Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR).
- SAGAR and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Threatens India's trade and energy security.
- Increases freight, insurance and logistics costs.
- May disrupt global supply chains and fuel inflation.
- Highlights strategic importance of the Indian Navy in securing Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Challenges

- Escalating West Asian geopolitical tensions.
- Limited effectiveness of the UN Security Council due to great-power rivalry.
- Threat to Indian seafarers employed on merchant vessels.
- Dependence on a few critical maritime chokepoints.

Way Forward

- Enhance Indian Navy's presence in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.
- Strengthen maritime domain awareness through IFC-IOR.
- Expand naval cooperation with France, Japan and regional partners.
- Diversify trade routes and strengthen supply-chain resilience.
- Uphold UNCLOS and freedom of navigation.
- Continue implementation of SAGAR and IPOI.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Reports suggested that Iran may direct the Houthi (Ansarallah) group in Yemen to disrupt shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait if the U.S. attacks Iranian infrastructure.
- The development has revived concerns over the security of the Red Sea shipping corridor, following the Houthi attacks during the 2023–24 Red Sea crisis.
- Any disruption in the Strait could severely affect India's trade, energy security, and maritime supply chains, as a significant share of India's trade with Europe passes through this route.

Key Points

Bab el-Mandeb Strait

- Connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea.
- Lies between Yemen and Djibouti & Eritrea (Horn of Africa).
- Forms the southern gateway to the Suez Canal.

Importance

- One of the world's most important maritime chokepoints.
- Around 12% of global trade and 30% of global container traffic transit through the Red Sea–Suez route (UNCTAD).
- Nearly one-third of India's merchandise trade passes through this corridor.

2023–24 Red Sea Crisis

- Houthis targeted commercial ships allegedly linked to Israel.
- The U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian (2023) was launched to protect commercial shipping.
- UNSC Resolution 2722 (2024) reaffirmed freedom of navigation and condemned attacks on merchant vessels.

New Delhi's leadership can help prevent another major shipping crisis in the Red Sea

All is not well

The violent incidents following youth protests in Delhi were entirely avoidable

Issue-driven mobilisation by civil society groups tends to remain orderly so long as the government of the day signals that it is willing to listen and engage with genuine concerns. The scenes from Delhi on July 20, when mostly young demonstrators were chased, tear-gassed, and baton-charged within sight of the new Parliament building, with some allegedly struck by pellet guns, while mobile Internet was switched off and Metro stations were shut across the area, were avoidable. The Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) march escalated only after the police resorted to force. Had the Union government engaged with the protesters earlier, including activist Sonam Wangchuk, who was on an indefinite fast and forcibly hospitalised two days earlier, the confrontation could have been avoided. A meeting was eventually conceded through Union Minister J.P. Nadda, but only after thousands had reached Parliament's doorstep. It came too late. That a movement born as online satire could gather millions of digital followers and bring thousands to the street says a great deal about the government's own record, which has become the source of a litany of grievances. Recurring paper leaks in entrance examinations, the re-conducting of NEET, and the friction over the three-language formula have led to deep concerns that higher education is being administered without accountability by the government.

Yet, it would be a mistake to read the anger as being about examinations alone. Increasingly, the protests have crystallised into a wider discontent over joblessness, stagnant wages and rising prices that weigh on the young across the country. The intensity of the protests also owes much to the Narendra Modi-led BJP government's disinclination to address genuine civil society concerns except when an election is in view. Course corrections over the last 12-plus years have tended to be timed to the ballot rather than parliamentary sessions or to public disquiet, even as narrow electoral wins in Assembly and parliamentary elections are read as expansive mandates and a licence for an increasingly authoritarian style of rule. The protests, which have drawn support beyond Delhi, are reminiscent of Sri Lanka's Aragalaya, Nepal's Gen Z revolt and Bangladesh's student uprising against authoritarian rule, though their scale and demands remain far narrower in comparison. That should not tempt the government to wait them out. Instead of correcting course, it has sought to reduce the protests to a political duel with the Congress-led Opposition, and to deflect attention from its failures through proxies in civil society and the media. This is self-defeating as it will only deepen youth disillusionment with the democratic system itself. An immediate step is in order. The Union Education Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, must own the failures on his watch and resign. The alternative is an unceremonious dismissal.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- A youth-led civil society mobilisation in New Delhi highlighted concerns over:
 - Alleged irregularities in competitive examinations (paper leaks, examination management).
 - Governance and accountability in the higher education sector.
 - Rising unemployment, inflation, and limited employment opportunities.
- The protests reignited debate on the balance between Fundamental Rights and maintenance of public order, as well as the role of governments in addressing public grievances through democratic dialogue.

Key Points

- Civil Society: Voluntary, non-governmental organisations and citizen groups that act as intermediaries between the State and citizens to promote public welfare, accountability and democratic participation.
- Pressure Groups: Organised groups that seek to influence public policy without seeking political power.
- Constitutional Provisions
 - Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of Speech and Expression.

- Article 19(1)(b): Right to Assemble Peacefully and Without Arms.
- Article 19(1)(c): Right to Form Associations or Unions.
- Articles 19(2) & 19(3): Reasonable restrictions in the interests of sovereignty, integrity, security of the State and public order.
- Article 14: Equality before Law.
- Article 21: Protection of Life and Personal Liberty.
- Internet Shutdowns
 - Governed by the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017.
 - Must satisfy the principles of necessity, proportionality, temporariness and judicial review.
- Important Supreme Court Judgments
 - Himmat Lal Shah v. Commissioner of Police (1973): Citizens have a right to hold public meetings on public streets, subject to reasonable regulation.
 - Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan v. Union of India (2018): Right to protest is a constitutional right but must be balanced with rights of others.
 - Amit Sahni v. Commissioner of Police (Shaheen Bagh) (2020): Public spaces cannot be occupied indefinitely for protests.
 - Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India (2020): Internet shutdowns must be necessary, proportionate and temporary.

Static Linkages

- Fundamental Rights.
- Reasonable Restrictions.
- Rule of Law.
- Constitutional Morality.
- Civil Society.
- Pressure Groups.
- Participatory Democracy.
- Good Governance.
- Transparency and Accountability.
- Citizen-Centric Administration.
- Doctrine of Proportionality.
- Public Order and Internal Security.
- Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2nd ARC): Citizen participation and responsive governance.

Critical Analysis

Importance of Civil Society

- Promotes participatory democracy.

- Acts as a bridge between citizens and government.
- Strengthens transparency and accountability.
- Brings neglected public issues into policy discourse.
- Enhances democratic legitimacy through public participation.

Challenges

- Maintaining balance between the right to protest and public order.
- Politicisation of civil society movements.
- Excessive use of force may reduce public trust in institutions.
- Internet shutdowns can affect education, healthcare, banking and economic activities.
- Delayed institutional response often escalates public dissatisfaction.

Way Forward

- Strengthen transparency and accountability in examination and recruitment systems.
- Institutionalise regular consultation with stakeholders before major policy decisions.
- Establish robust grievance-redress mechanisms for students and youth.
- Ensure policing follows the principles of necessity, proportionality and minimum force.
- Limit internet shutdowns to exceptional situations with periodic review.
- Promote evidence-based and participatory policymaking.
- Strengthen institutional accountability through independent oversight mechanisms.

Buried questions

The costs of projects in environmentally fragile zones are many

India is grappling with another Himalayan tragedy. Workers in an under-construction tunnel at the Teesta Stage-VI hydroelectric project of NHPC Limited (formerly National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Private Ltd.), in Sikkim's Namchi district, struck a pocket of suspected trapped methane. The resulting burst partially damaged the tunnel, killing at least 15 of an estimated 25 workers, with rescue operations still under way. The NHPC has announced a detailed investigation. Methane is a well-recognised hazard in underground excavation, and the geology of the Teesta basin makes it a likely one. The basin sits in a seismically active zone, with young and heavily fractured rock, and where compressed pockets of gas laid down long ago can lie hidden until an excavation breaks into them. The presence of the gas, in that sense, is not in itself surprising. What remains unclear is far more consequential: the precise circumstances in which the pocket was breached, whether its risk was assessed and modelled during project planning, and whether the gas-detection and ventilation safeguards that such conditions demand were in place and functioning.

Underground work in India's difficult terrain has always been perilous. In February this year, an explosion at an illegal coal mine in Meghalaya killed about 30 workers, and in 2023, a stretch of a road tunnel under construction in Uttarakhand collapsed, trapping 41 workers for 17 days before they were pulled out. The circumstances vary, but together they underscore how lethal underground and tunnelling work remains across the country. A series of hydropower projects along the 400-kilometre stretch of the Teesta that links Sikkim, West Bengal, and Bangladesh have varied histories with environmental clearances but share a common feature – their location in the fragile Himalayan belt. That vulnerability was demonstrated tragically in October 2023, when a glacial lake outburst flood from the South Lhonak lake destroyed the Teesta-III dam and killed more than a 100 people downstream. Teesta-VI was absorbed by the public-sector NHPC Limited after its private developers, unable to afford escalating costs, went into insolvency. Relief and rescue must remain the immediate priority, and every effort to reach those still trapped is warranted. But once the emergency has passed, the government cannot treat the disaster as an isolated misfortune. It must order a thorough, independent review of whether the conditions attached to the project's environmental clearance were, in practice, strictly met.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- A methane gas burst occurred during tunnel excavation at the Teesta Stage-VI Hydroelectric Project in Namchi district, Sikkim, leading to multiple casualties.
- The project is being developed by NHPC Limited.
- The incident has raised concerns regarding geological hazards, worker safety, environmental compliance, and hydropower development in the fragile Himalayan region.

Key Points

- Project: Teesta Stage-VI Hydroelectric Project.
- Developer: NHPC Limited.
- River: Teesta River.
- State: Sikkim.
- Methane (CH₄) is a colourless, odourless, highly combustible greenhouse gas that may remain trapped within underground rock formations.
- The Teesta basin lies in the Eastern Himalayas, characterized by:
 - Young fold mountains
 - Highly fractured rocks
 - Active tectonics
 - High seismicity (Zone IV/V)
- Essential safety measures during tunnel excavation:

- Geological & geophysical investigations
- Methane detection systems
- Adequate tunnel ventilation
- Emergency evacuation protocols
- Continuous geotechnical monitoring

Static Linkages

- Himalayas are young fold mountains formed due to the collision of the Indian Plate and Eurasian Plate.
- Young mountains possess:
 - Unstable slopes
 - Active faults
 - Frequent landslides
 - Earthquake vulnerability
 - Methane (CH₄): Principal component of natural gas.
 - Highly flammable.
 - Potent greenhouse gas.
- Large hydropower projects require Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and prior Environmental Clearance (EC) under the Environmental Impact Assessment Notification, 2006.
- The Disaster Management Act, 2005 provides the institutional framework for disaster preparedness and response.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Hydropower supports India's renewable energy targets and enhances energy security.
- Infrastructure improves regional connectivity and economic development.

Concerns

- Fragile Himalayan geology increases construction risks.
- Cumulative impact of multiple hydropower projects on river ecology.
- Inadequate geological risk assessment and safety monitoring.
- Increasing frequency of climate-induced disasters (GLOFs, landslides, flash floods).
- Occupational safety standards require stronger implementation.

Challenges

- Balancing infrastructure development with ecological sustainability.
- Compliance with Environmental Clearance conditions.
- Disaster-resilient engineering in high-risk mountain terrain.
- Scientific geological mapping before project execution.

Way Forward

- Strengthen geological and geotechnical investigations before tunnelling.
- Install advanced methane detection and automated ventilation systems.
- Conduct periodic independent safety audits.
- Strict monitoring of Environmental Clearance compliance.
- Undertake cumulative basin-level environmental impact assessments.
- Integrate climate resilience into Himalayan infrastructure planning.
- Improve worker safety standards and emergency preparedness.

The voice of India's youth must be heard inside Parliament



THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

THE TRUE measure of a constitutional democracy lies not in the authority it wields to enforce compliance, but in the quality with which it engages dissent. A secure republic treats peaceful protest as an opportunity to look into a mirror reflecting the anxieties of its citizenry. A fragile executive, by contrast, treats that same mirror as an enemy, chattering it with bullets and turning a blind eye when the glass places fall on the streets outside the gates of power, cutting the veins of its citizens.

What the nation has witnessed in recent days on the streets of the national capital is a deeply troubling demonstration of democratic atrophy. Citizens, primarily young students and peaceful activists, many inspired by the symbolic leadership of the fasting Sonam Wangchuk, gathered to demand accountability on issues touching their very futures. The response from the apparatus of the state was not a dialogue, but a crack-down, silencing their voices with violence and detention.

Lathi charges broke through crowds of non-violent demonstrators, sending nearly a hundred young men and women to hospital emergency wards with fractures, contusions, and trauma. The sight of police officers wielding batons against unarmed youth, while internet blackouts and closed metro stations throttled the flow of both information and people, felt less like the res-

tore maintenance of public order in a constitutional republic and more like the heavy-handed oppression of a police state. I spoke to a young man at Jantar Mantar who had been hit on the head and below the eye with a lathi and still wore a large bandage to staunch the bleeding. My heart bled to see what the custodians of law and order had done to a youth who was peacefully distributing water to the protesters.

Equally jarring has been the government's disgraceful mishandling of the protesting Leader of the Opposition and the environmentalist-educator Sonam Wangchuk's hunger strike. For three weeks, Wangchuk sat in quiet, disciplined fast at Jantar Mantar, a historic venue designated precisely for the public expression of grievance. His method was classically Gandhian. Self-abnegation as an appeal to the conscience of the state. The smart thing for the government to do would have been to send a minister with a glass of nimbu pani and the assurance of a discussion in Parliament, to urge him to break his fast.

Yet, rather than engaging in a spirit of constructive conciliation, the state chose the path of coercion. Under the cloak of medical necessity, police force descended upon the protest site to forcibly remove the frail 69-year-old activist to a government hospital. The line between medical intervention and state custody became dangerously blurred, and even here the government was found wanting in basic humanity. The appalling treatment of Rahul Gandhi, who was bodily lifted and dragged into detention, was a betrayal of the democratic compact.

A state that fears the moral voice of India that their voices need not be battered and bruised on the streets to be heard in the corridors of power

rected at protest organisers speak to a broader political strategy: Render the movement leaderless, criminalise its protests, and wear out public outrage.

The scene on the streets represents a failure of governance; the response inside the halls of Parliament so far represents a systemic failure of legislative duty. As central Delhi burned with frustration and tears, one might have reasonably expected the sacred precincts of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha to reverberate with urgent debate. The Opposition moved numerous notices demanding a suspension of business to discuss the breakdown of law and order, the grievance of the protesting youth, and the excessive force used by law enforcement.

These notices were met with summary rejections, procedural stonewalling, and unyielding governmental indifference. The message conveyed to the nation was unmistakable: The grievances echoing across the streets outside were unwelcome on the carpeted floors inside. When the executive insulates itself from parliamentary discussion, it strikes at the fundamental design of parliamentary democracy — a system where the executive is accountable to the legislature, representing the sovereign will of the people.

The government has done well, even if belatedly, to signal its willingness for a parliamentary discussion. For, if Parliament is not the forum for the nation's elected representatives to ventilate public grievances, interrogate executive overreach, and seek solutions to pressing social crises, then what purpose does it serve? It cannot be reduced to a glorified notice-board for ministerial announcements, nor an administrative rubber stamp to pass the government's bills.

When a government closes the door to parliamentary debate and deploys police lathi on public streets, it creates a dangerous vacuum. Dissent does not disappear simply because it is beaten out of public sight; it merely turns inward, festering into cynicism and alienation among the young, like the female students at Jantar Mantar who held in disbelief of being manhandled by policemen and witnessing demonstrators being assaulted with brutality by men in plain clothes wielding lathi studded with nails.

Democracy is sustained not by the enforcement of silence, but by the welcoming of open debate. The right to peaceful assembly under Article 19(1)(b) of our Constitution is not a privilege conceded by the state at its convenience; it is a foundational right forged in our freedom struggle. To treat peaceful demonstrations as security threats or law-and-order nuisances is to forget that the very architects of our republic were themselves courageous protesters who chose the weapons of satyagraha over submission.

The path forward to preserve our democratic compact requires an immediate course correction. An independent judicial inquiry must be instituted into the excessive use of force, police inquiries, and lathi charges against non-violent protesters. Accountability is essential for wrangling both here and in the conduct of examinations. The government must unconditionally engage with representatives of the protesting students rather than relying on police containment. And the Speaker and the Treasury benches must allow uninhibited discussion on the public's grievances on the floor of the House. That is what Parliament is for, and it must reclaim its pride of place as the deliberative sanctuary of the republic.

It is time to prove to the youth of India that their voices need not be battered and bruised on the streets to be heard in the corridors of power.

The author is a fourth-term Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram

Static Linkages

- Fundamental Rights are justiciable but not absolute.
- Doctrine of Reasonable Restrictions.
- Doctrine of Proportionality.
- Rule of Law.
- Parliamentary Accountability.
- Separation of Powers.
- Judicial Review.
- Civil Liberties in a Constitutional Democracy.
- Gandhian principle of Satyagraha as a constitutional value of peaceful dissent.

Critical Analysis

Arguments Supporting State Action

- Maintaining public order is a constitutional obligation.
- Preventing violence and protecting public property are legitimate State functions.
- Reasonable restrictions are constitutionally permissible under Article 19.

Concerns

- Excessive use of force may violate Articles 19 and 21.
- Arbitrary restrictions weaken democratic participation.
- Inadequate parliamentary discussion reduces Executive accountability.
- Frequent communication restrictions raise concerns regarding proportionality.
- Suppression of peaceful dissent may erode public trust in institutions.

Constitutional Issues

- Liberty vs Public Order.
- Reasonable Restrictions vs Arbitrary Restrictions.
- Democratic Accountability.
- Rule of Law.
- Judicial Oversight over Executive Action.

Way Forward

- Ensure police action adheres to the principles of necessity, legality and proportionality.
- Strengthen parliamentary oversight over issues involving civil liberties.
- Institutionalise independent inquiries into allegations of excessive force.
- Enhance police training in human rights and scientific crowd management.
- Promote structured dialogue between governments and peaceful protest groups.
- Ensure restrictions on Fundamental Rights satisfy the constitutional test of reasonableness and remain subject to judicial review.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Recent protests in New Delhi by students and civil society groups demanding accountability on public issues witnessed police action, detentions, restrictions on movement and temporary communication curbs.
- The incident has revived debate on the balance between Fundamental Rights and the State's responsibility to maintain public order.
- The issue also highlighted the role of Parliament in ensuring Executive accountability.

Key Points

- Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of Speech and Expression.
- Article 19(1)(b): Right to assemble peacefully and without arms.
- Article 19(3): State may impose reasonable restrictions in the interests of:
 - Public Order
 - Sovereignty and Integrity of India.
- Article 21: Protection of life and personal liberty.
- Article 32 & Article 226: Constitutional remedies against violation of Fundamental Rights.
- Public Order is a State List (List II, Seventh Schedule) subject.
- Police powers are exercised under:
 - Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023
 - State Police Acts.
- Parliament is constitutionally responsible for:
 - Holding the Executive accountable.
 - Discussing matters of urgent public importance.
- The Supreme Court has consistently held that peaceful protest is a constitutional right, but it is not an absolute right and is subject to reasonable restrictions.

Trade deals need to be set in strategy, not expediency



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

DEAR EDITOR I disagree

A fortnightly column in which we invite readers to tell us why, when they differ with the editorial positions or news coverage of 'The Indian Express'

India should eliminate exploitative labour practices because they weaken our economy, diminish our reputation and betray our own values, not because another country expects it

A RECENT editorial in this newspaper argued that a deal with the United States now will go a long way in reducing the uncertainty that has marred relations between the countries, while expanding trade (Ahead of the big deal, strike a careful balance'. (E, July 17). But the proposed India-United States trade agreement is about far more than trade. It is about how a rising India engages the world's largest economy while preserving the strategic confidence, policy flexibility and institutional freedom that will define its next phase of growth.

Even after agreements with the UK, Australia and Europe, no market matches the scale, investment capacity, technological depth and strategic importance of the US. Equally, America has strong reasons to deepen its economic engagement with India. It seeks access to one of the world's fastest-growing consumer markets, a trusted strategic partner in an uncertain Indo-Pacific and an economy that will shape demand for digital and financial services. Neither country can fully realise its ambitions without a deeper partnership with the other.

Washington may also have underestimated India by assuming that the goodwill and political symbolism of the Howdy Modi moment would translate into greater negotiating flexibility and acceptance of US preferences in a bilateral agreement. It did not. Tariffs, public pressure and shifting geopolitical signals may have tested the relationship, but they did not fundamentally alter India's negotiating posture, reminding both capitals that political chemistry has its limits, whereas sound public policy demands pragmatism, reciprocity and an unwavering commitment to long-term interests.

That is precisely why these negotiations deserve greater public reflection. The pursuit of immediate economic gain, or the political satisfaction of announcing a successful agreement, could gradually narrow the policy choices available to future governments. Every bilateral negotiation requires accommodation. None should diminish a nation's long-term strategic confidence.

Diplomatic engagement has become more transactional and, on occasion, un-

comfortably patronising. Tariffs, sanctions, export controls, technology restrictions and financial access have become instruments of geopolitical influence. India has navigated these changes with composure. That composure should continue, but New Delhi must remain anchored in strategic judgement rather than tactical expediency.

The commitments India accepts today may well become the standards the US expects from it and others tomorrow. Trade agreements increasingly establish geopolitical precedents, not merely commercial obligations. That is why every clause deserves to be negotiated with an eye on the next decade rather than the next news cycle. The concerns over forced labour should also prompt introspection, not indignation. India should eliminate exploitative labour practices because they weaken our economy, diminish our reputation and betray our own values, not because another country expects it.

Equal care is required in areas extending beyond merchandise trade. Labour mobility, digital trade, data governance, and emerging technologies will shape India's development long after tariff schedules are forgotten. The defining lesson of contemporary geopolitics is unmistakable: Technology that a nation does not own can, one day, be used to influence, constrain or coerce it. Trade agreements must preserve India's sovereign ability to govern its data, regulate its digital economy and shape its technological future. The same discipline should guide India's approach to food and energy security.

Agreements of this consequence acquire greater durability and public confidence when subjected to scrutiny before becoming binding national commitments. Such scrutiny strengthens international agreements by giving them wider political ownership and democratic legitimacy. The understandable desire to conclude an agreement within a political timetable should never outweigh the responsibility of preserving India's long-term strategic choices. We should negotiate for the economy we aspire to become, not merely the economy we happen to be.

Sridharan is a corporate advisor and author of Family and Dhandu

- Liberalisation of digital trade and financial services.
- Stronger IPR protection.
- Major Negotiation Areas Tariffs
- Rules of Origin
- Services Trade
- Investment
- Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS+ provisions)
- Digital Trade
- Cross-border Data Flows
- Labour & Environmental Standards
- Government Procurement

Static Linkages

- Article 253 – Parliament can make laws for implementing international treaties.
- Article 246 read with Seventh Schedule – Foreign trade falls under the Union List.
- Foreign Trade (Development and Regulation) Act, 1992 – Governs India's foreign trade policy.
 - WTO Principles Most Favoured Nation (MFN)
 - National Treatment
 - Special & Differential Treatment
- India follows the principle of Strategic Autonomy in foreign policy.
- Modern FTAs increasingly include:
 - Digital Economy
 - E-commerce
 - Investment Protection
 - Intellectual Property
 - Competition Policy
 - Sustainable Development provisions

Critical Analysis

Opportunities

- Diversification of export markets.
- Higher FDI inflows.
- Integration into Global Value Chains (GVCs).
- Technology transfer and innovation.
- Employment generation.
- Supply-chain resilience under Indo-Pacific cooperation.
- Strengthening India-US strategic partnership.

Concerns

- Reduced tariff policy flexibility.
- Possible adverse impact on MSMEs.
- Agricultural market access concerns.
- Stronger IPR obligations affecting pharmaceutical sector.
- Restrictions on digital policy and data localisation.
- Labour and environmental standards becoming non-tariff barriers.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- India and the United States are negotiating a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) to enhance trade, investment, technology cooperation and supply-chain resilience.
- The proposed agreement is expected to cover goods, services, digital trade, investment, intellectual property rights (IPR), labour standards and data governance, making it a comprehensive trade agreement rather than a tariff-focused pact.
- The negotiations assume significance as the U.S. is India's largest trading partner in goods and services combined.
- The central issue is balancing economic integration with India's strategic autonomy, policy space and technological sovereignty.

Key Points

- Objective Expand bilateral trade and investment.
- Improve market access.
- Strengthen technology partnerships.
- Build resilient supply chains.
- India's Priorities Greater access for exports.
- Increased FDI and technology transfer.
- Protection of agriculture, MSMEs and sensitive sectors.
- Preserve digital sovereignty and policy flexibility.
- US Priorities Greater access to India's consumer market.
- Lower tariffs on selected products.

- Increased dependence on foreign technology.
- Long-term constraints on industrial policy.

Way Forward

- Ensure a balanced and reciprocal agreement.
- Protect sensitive sectors through calibrated tariff liberalisation.
- Preserve India's policy space for future industrial and digital policies.
- Safeguard data sovereignty and critical digital infrastructure.
- Strengthen domestic manufacturing through Atmanirbhar Bharat and PLI Schemes.
- Align trade commitments with long-term national security and strategic interests.
- Maintain consistency with WTO obligations while safeguarding developmental priorities.
- Conduct wider stakeholder consultations before finalising commitments.

It's not just about a retest, it's about the India story

THE PROTESTORS at Jantar Mantar demand the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in order to enforce accountability for the leak of the NEET exam paper. The BJP-led government promises strict action against those involved and reiterates the successful conduct of the retest. In the stand-off, however, one point may be getting inadequate attention — focusing on the examination is important, but not enough. While hundreds of thousands appear in competitive examinations like NEET, only a small number gets selected. The challenge facing India's youth is much larger and encompassing: The vast majority continues to be ill-prepared and poorly-equipped to participate in India's growth story.

Nor is this a matter that can be solved by higher budgetary allocations alone. The Union government's allocations for education, according to an analysis in this newspaper, have come down sharply as a percentage of total government expenditure over the past 12 years since the BJP led-NDA government took charge. That downward trajectory is telling — it speaks about the government's commitment, or lack of it, to education. At the same time, the central government's budget allocation is not the only, or main, issue holding back improvements in the educational system of the country. Part of the problem is that education, which used to be a state subject until 1976, was shifted to the Concurrent List. This means the system's efficacy calls for a substantial degree of coordination between the Centre and state governments. The quality and efficacy of the education system must also be measured by its ability to make students employable in an ever-changing economy, at a time when technological change and geopolitics are disrupting long-held assumptions about human resource management and growth.

Even though the government has received generous mandates since 2014, its commitment to education has been far less visible than the energy and political capital it has invested in advancing its chosen cultural projects. So far, other than a refresh of the National Education Policy, it has not adequately prioritised investments in human resources as the necessary infrastructure for prosperity in the new economy. By the time the next general election comes along in 2029, a generation of voters will have grown up in a country ruled by NDA governments. These young voters are likely to be much more impatient with the lack of reforms in the education system, and the larger toll it takes on growth. The Jantar Mantar mobilisation by the young isn't just asking the government to fix an exam. It frames, instead, the urgent imperative to bring education to front and centre of governance — and the political discourse. The government, in its third term, with three years to go, needs to dial down the self-serving surround sound and listen to this message.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Alleged NEET paper leak triggered nationwide protests demanding accountability and examination reforms.
- The issue has shifted the focus from examination security to the overall quality, governance, funding and employability outcomes of India's education system.
- It highlights the need for strengthening human capital to fully realise India's demographic dividend.

Key Points

- NEET is the national entrance examination for undergraduate medical education.
- Education is a Concurrent List subject (42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976).
- National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 aims to transform India's education system through multidisciplinary learning, flexibility, skill development and improved governance.
- Article 21A provides the Right to Education for children aged 6–14 years.
- The RTE Act, 2009 operationalises Article 21A.
- Kothari Commission (1964–66) and NEP 2020 recommend public expenditure of 6% of GDP on education.
- Economic Survey identifies investment in human capital as a prerequisite for sustained economic growth and demographic dividend.
- NTA (National Testing Agency) conducts major national entrance examinations including NEET, JEE Main, CUET and UGC-NET.

Static Linkages

- Article 21A – Right to Education (6–14 years).
- Article 41 – Right to education (Directive Principle).
- Article 45 – Early Childhood Care and Education.
- Article 46 – Promotion of educational interests of SCs, STs and weaker sections.
- Entry 25, List III (Concurrent List) – Education.
- 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976 – Shifted education from State List to Concurrent List.
- RTE Act, 2009.
- NEP 2020.
- Kothari Commission (1964–66).
- Human Capital Formation and Demographic Dividend.

Critical Analysis

Importance

- Ensures credibility of national examinations.
- Builds quality human capital.
- Improves employability and productivity.
- Strengthens demographic dividend.
- Enhances trust in public institutions.

Challenges

- Repeated examination malpractices reduce institutional credibility.
- Learning outcomes remain uneven across States.
- Public expenditure on education remains below the recommended level.
- Weak Centre–State coordination in implementation.
- Skill mismatch between education and labour market.
- Excessive reliance on high-stakes examinations.

Way Forward

- Strengthen examination security through advanced technology and independent audits.
- Reform the National Testing Agency with greater transparency and accountability.
- Increase public investment towards the 6% of GDP target.
- Improve learning outcomes through teacher capacity building and foundational literacy.
- Align higher education with industry and future workforce requirements.
- Strengthen cooperative federalism in education governance.
- Shift focus from rote learning to competency-based education as envisaged under NEP 2020.