

**The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC
CSE**

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Page 01 : GS II : International relations

India and Malaysia share a deep-rooted relationship characterized by historical, cultural, and maritime linkages. In 2026, the bilateral engagement reached a new milestone as both nations signed 11 landmark agreements. This visit is strategically significant for India's **"Act East Policy"** and its vision for a "free, open, and inclusive" Indo-Pacific. By focusing on emerging sectors like semiconductors and digital finance, the two nations are moving toward "strategic trust" to navigate global economic instabilities.

India and Malaysia sign pacts to expand ties

The two countries sign agreements in critical areas, including defence and semiconductors

In Kuala Lumpur, Modi and Malaysian PM stress their efforts to promote trade in local currencies

The PM announced that an Indian Consulate General is to be established in Malaysia soon

Press Trust of India
KUALA LUMPUR

India and Malaysia on Sunday vowed to expand their ties in the high-priority sectors of trade and investment, defence, energy, advanced manufacturing and semiconductors with Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserting that both sides are committed to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Following his wide-ranging talks with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Mr. Modi reiterated India's position on combating terrorism as he said: "Our message on terrorism is clear; no double standard, no compromise." The two sides inked a total of 11 agreements and docu-

ments to expand cooperation in a range of key areas, including a framework pact for deeper engagement in the semiconductor sector.

Mr. Modi, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday, and Mr. Ibrahim appreciated efforts to promote the usage of local currencies – the Indian rupee and Malaysian ringgit – for trade settlement.

"We will pave the way for economic transformation through strategic trust," Mr. Modi said, describing the India-Malaysia relationship as "special".

During the visit, Mr. Modi met Malaysia's Indian-origin Ministers, MPs, and Senators and interacted with four leading industry leaders.

"We are maritime neigh-



Bidding adieu: Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves to the gathering before his departure from Malaysia on Sunday. PTI

bours. For centuries, our peoples have had deep and cordial ties," he said in his media statement. Mr. Modi also announced India's decision to establish an Indian Consulate General in Malaysia. In his remarks,

Mr. Ibrahim noted India's economic growth and said his country would benefit immensely if it could secure more ways and opportunities to collaborate with New Delhi. "It [India's economic

growth] is on spectacular rise in the international trade scene," he said, describing the decision to use local currencies for bilateral trade as "remarkable".

In the talks, Malaysia extended its support for India's permanent membership in a reformed United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Elaborating on engagement in the security domain, Mr. Modi said cooperation in counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, and maritime security will be strengthened, adding that both sides will further expand defence ties.

"Along with AI and digital technologies, we will advance partnerships in semiconductors, health, and food security," he said,

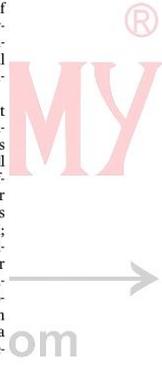
noting that the discussions at the CEO Forum opened new opportunities for trade and investment.

The Prime Minister touched upon India's position on Indo-Pacific and its steadfast views on the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations's (ASEAN) centrality in the region. "The Indo-Pacific region is emerging as the world's growth engine. We, along with ASEAN, are committed to development, peace, and stability throughout the Indo-Pacific region," he said.

"With the support of friendly countries like Malaysia, India will further expand its relations with ASEAN. We agree that the review of the ASEAN-India Trade Agreement, ITIGA, should be completed expeditiously," he added.

Mr. Modi said he and Mr. Ibrahim also had a "meaningful discussion" on regional and global issues. "In this environment of global instability, the growing friendship between India and Malaysia is of vital importance to both countries."

"We share the view that reform of global institutions is essential to address today's challenges. We will continue to support all efforts for peace. And our message on terrorism is clear: No double standard; no compromise," he added. "We appreciate your commitment to India-Malaysia relations. Let us together realise your dream of a prosperous Malaysia and our resolve for a developed India," he said.



Key Pillars of the 2026 Agreements

A. Economic and Financial Transformation

Local Currency Settlement: Both leaders agreed to promote trade in **Indian Rupee (INR)** and **Malaysian Ringgit (MYR)**.

This move facilitates "de-dollarization," reduces transaction costs, and shields bilateral trade from global exchange rate volatility.

Digital Finance Linkages: A major pact between India's **NPCI International (NIPL)** and Malaysia's **PayNet** was signed to establish cross-border payment linkages (UPI-PayNet integration), benefiting tourists, students, and small businesses.

Trade Volume: The leaders set sights on surpassing the previous year's bilateral trade of **\$18.6 billion**, leveraging the review of the **ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA)**.

B. Technology and Advanced Manufacturing

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Semiconductors: A framework pact was inked to integrate both nations into the global semiconductor supply chain. Malaysia's expertise in testing and packaging complements India's growing design and manufacturing ambitions.

Digital Council: The formalization of the **Malaysia-India Digital Council (MIDC)** will oversee cooperation in AI, Cybersecurity, and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI).

C. Strategic and Defence Cooperation

Maritime Security: As maritime neighbors, both countries vowed to increase intelligence sharing and joint patrolling to ensure stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Counter-Terrorism: Reaffirming a "no double standard, no compromise" policy, the two nations agreed to co-chair the **ADMM-Plus Counter-Terrorism Working Group (2024-2027)**.

UNSC Reforms: In a major diplomatic win for India, Malaysia reiterated its support for India's permanent membership in a reformed **UN Security Council**.

D. Cultural and Diplomatic Outreach

Diplomatic Expansion: India announced the establishment of a new **Consulate General in Malaysia** (Sabah state) to better serve the 2-million-strong Indian diaspora.

Traditional Medicine: An MoU on Ayurveda and traditional medicine was signed, including the establishment of an **Ayurveda Chair** at a Malaysian university.

Strategic Significance for India

ASEAN Centrality: Malaysia is a key pillar of ASEAN. Strengthening ties here helps India balance China's growing influence in Southeast Asia.

Energy Security: Malaysia remains a critical and reliable supplier of **sustainable palm oil** and a partner in green hydrogen and solar energy initiatives.

Countering Radicalization: Enhanced intelligence sharing helps address mutual concerns regarding transnational crime and radicalization in the region.

Challenges to Address

Trade Imbalance: India currently runs a trade deficit with Malaysia, primarily due to palm oil and electronic imports.

Geopolitical Sensitivities: Navigating Malaysia's balanced relationship with China while deepening security ties with India requires "strategic autonomy" from both sides.

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Conclusion

The 2026 summit has successfully recalibrated India-Malaysia ties for the 21st century. By moving beyond commodities into **semiconductors, AI, and digital payments**, the relationship has transitioned into a "Future-Ready Partnership." For India, Malaysia serves as a vital gateway to the ASEAN region and a key partner in realizing the "Viksit Bharat" (Developed India) vision by 2047. The establishment of a new consulate and the emphasis on local currency trade are practical steps that ensure these high-level policies translate into grassroots economic benefits.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: The elevation of India-Malaysia relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2026 reflects India's evolving engagement with ASEAN under the Act East Policy. Discuss the strategic significance of Malaysia for India in the Indo-Pacific region. **(150 Words)**

Page 06 : GS I : Indian Society

As India prepares for the **2026-27 Census**, the methodology for enumerating caste remains a point of intense debate. Professor G.N. Devy, a Padma Shri awardee and lead of the "Peoples' Linguistic Survey of India," suggests that the "riddle" of millions of reported caste names can be solved not by pre-defined lists, but through **linguistic and cultural markers**. This approach emphasizes scientific post-enumeration scrutiny over rigid data collection.

'Linguistic, cultural markers can solve caste enumeration riddle'

Professor G.N. Devy says this approach may begin with collecting information on mother tongues; the scholar and linguist notes that not taking this opportunity to separately enumerate Denotified Tribes could alienate more than 10 crore people

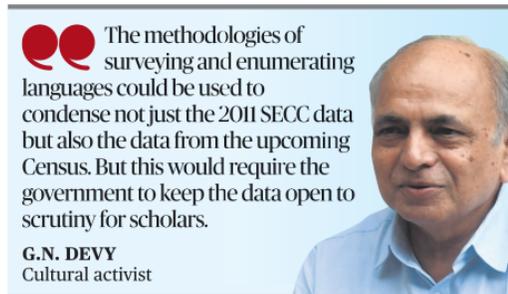
Abhinav Lakshman
 NEW DELHI

Linguistic and cultural markers could hold the key to solving the caste enumeration riddle, says scholar, linguist, author, and cultural activist G.N. Devy.

In an exclusive conversation with *The Hindu*, he explained that even if residents entered what they thought was their caste name, post-Census studies and a carefully layered scrutiny could analyse markers of language, ancestry, lifestyle, and kinships to arrive at a comprehensive list of castes that accounts for all groups, while being able to explain duplication, variations in names, and spellings.

"This model has been tried and tested for languages," said Professor Devy, whose work leading the "Peoples' Linguistic Survey of India" project resulted in the documentation of more than 780 languages in the country.

The Union government has planned to hold the



next Census in 2026 and 2027. The first phase – houselisting – is set to be completed this year; the second phase – population enumeration (with caste) – is due in 2027. However, the methodology for caste enumeration has not yet been announced by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India.

There are discussions among activists, scholars, and community leaders about two possible methods: the first is to leave an open field in the Census form – what the 2011 Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) did; and the second is to compile a list of

castes for people to select from – what Bihar's Caste-based Survey did. The argument for the latter often draws its strength from the fact that the 2011 SECC ended up returning more than 46 lakh caste names.

Post-Census study

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Professor Devy argued in favour of the first method, saying that the methodologies of surveying and enumerating languages could be used to condense not just the 2011 SECC data but also the data from the upcoming Census. However, he noted that this would require the government to keep the data open to scrutiny

by scholars and involve institutions such as the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI).

Explaining the approach, Professor Devy said the process may begin with collecting information on mother tongues. "The 2011 Census returned 19,000 mother tongues. But this was put through multiple layers of scrutiny that accounted for duplication, variation in spellings, errors, and yet another layer to filter for those with verified grammar. This narrowed the list down to 1,369 mother tongue languages," he said.

Using the example of community classification, he continued, "Similarly, there is a community called Sansi in Punjab. The same community is called Kanjar in Rajasthan, Chhara in Gujarat, and Kanjar Bhat in Maharashtra. But it is one community because they have a shared language called Bhaktu. So, while the census will return four names, it can point to common language, ancestry, lifestyle,

relatives, marriages, and kinship bonds. And the Anthropological Survey of India can certify this."

Professor Devy added that works such as AnSI's 'People of India' project could be a reference point.

DNT count needed

Professor Devy, a scholar who co-founded the Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-nomadic Tribes - Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG), along with author Mahasweta Devi and has chaired the government's 2006 Technical Advisory Group for DNTs, said that the Census office must declare its intention to explicitly count the DNT communities (formerly classified as "criminal" under the colonial-era Criminal Tribes Act, 1871). He noted that if this opportunity is not taken, India risks alienating more than 10 crore people, presenting a "problem that can become much bigger than the problem of calculating, tabulating, and making a proper list".

Full interview on <https://newsth.live/Devy>

The Methodological Debate: Open Field vs. Pre-defined List

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Daily News Analysis

The government faces a choice between two primary methodologies

for the upcoming population enumeration:

Method	Approach	Precedent	Pros/Cons
Open Field	Residents write their caste name freely.	2011 SECC	Pro: Inclusive. Con: High variation (2011 SECC saw 46 lakh names).
Pre-defined List	Residents select from a set list of castes.	Bihar Caste Survey	Pro: Clean data. Con: May exclude sub-castes or local variations.

Devy's Stance: He advocates for the **Open Field** method, arguing that modern linguistic and anthropological tools can "clean" the data effectively after collection.

The "Linguistic & Cultural Marker" Approach

Professor Devy proposes a layered scrutiny model similar to the one used to categorize languages:

Mother Tongue as a Proxy: Just as the 2011 Census narrowed 19,000 "mother tongue" entries down to 1,369 verified languages through grammar and usage checks, caste names can be filtered.

Kinship and Ancestry: Shared markers such as ancestry, lifestyle, marriage patterns (kinship bonds), and unique dialects can link different names to a single community.

Example (The Sansi Community): In Punjab, they are Sansi.

In Rajasthan, they are Kanjar.

In Gujarat, they are Chhara.

The Link: They all share a common language called **Bhaktu**.

Institutional Role: He suggests that the **Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI)** should play a central role in certifying these clusters, using projects like "People of India" as a benchmark.

The Crisis of Denotified Tribes (DNTs)

A critical component of Devy's argument is the specific enumeration of **Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-nomadic Tribes (DNTs)**.

Historical Context: These tribes were classified as "criminal" under the British-era **Criminal Tribes Act of 1871**. Although "denotified" in 1952, they remain severely marginalized.

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Daily News Analysis

The Risk of Alienation: Devy estimates the DNT population at over **10 crore**. Failing to count them separately in the 2027 Census could lead to deep social alienation and the loss of targeted welfare benefits.

The "Double Burden": Many DNTs do not find themselves in the SC, ST, or OBC lists in various states, leaving them in a "stateless" condition regarding affirmative action.

Conclusion

The caste census is not merely a counting exercise but a sociopolitical necessity for equitable resource distribution. Professor Devy's "linguistic marker" model offers a middle path: it respects the self-identity of the citizen (Open Field) while utilizing scientific rigor (Linguistic/Anthropological scrutiny) to produce a clean, usable database. However, the success of this model depends on the government's willingness to involve scholars and keep the data open for public and academic audit.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Discuss the historical and contemporary challenges faced by Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) in India. How can a scientifically designed caste census help address their marginalization? **(250 words)**

Page 07 : GS III : Science and Tech

The 2026-27 Union Budget allocated **₹13,705.63 crore** to the Department of Space. A notable highlight is the nearly threefold increase in the **Space Sciences** head (approx. ₹570 crore), specifically targeting deep-space exploration and domestic telescope facilities. This move aims to reduce India's chronic "observation-time dependency" on foreign facilities like those in the US, EU, and Japan.

Budget boosts domestic space research while spending lags behind

Only a few large astronomical observatories are capable of groundbreaking discoveries worldwide, which means researchers have to compete for observation time, when funding agencies favour their own national researchers, international scientists' access becomes increasingly restricted, and Indians are no exception

Prakash Chandra

The Budget has brought some cheer to India's research community, particularly for those involved in astronomy and space research, as it has earmarked ₹3,416.20 crore for the Department of Space for 2026-27.

A large chunk of the allocation has been set aside for deep-space exploration and astrophysics, including to build two advanced telescope facilities: the 30 m National Large Optical-Infrared Telescope and the National Large Solar Telescope near Pangong Lake in Ladakh.

Also in focus is the COSMOS-2 planetarium in Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, to be completed soon, and improving the control systems of the Himalayan Chandra Telescope in Hanle, Ladakh. Currently, only the U.S., China, Japan and the European Union prioritise astronomy research to a high degree and constantly invest large sums to upgrade their terrestrial and space telescopes. So, astronomers have said, the telescope allocations will improve space research capability and science outreach in India.

Frontier research

However, experts also raised concerns about a significant drop in expenditure, with the actual expense falling short of budgetary estimates. This underutilisation has in the past led to bottlenecks in the planning and executing major projects.

"There were several proposed space missions which were finally not supported," Bhaswati Mookerjee, professor and chairperson of the Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai, said. Dr. Mookerjee added that although this Budget "is an extremely positive step for astronomy in India," the importance of following it through couldn't be overstated: "The execution of big projects in India would still require some streamlining of resources with checks and balances."

Only a few large astronomical observatories are capable of frontier research and groundbreaking discoveries worldwide, which means researchers have to compete for observation time. And when funding agencies favour their own national researchers, international scientists' access becomes increasingly restricted, and Indians are no exception.

Relying on overseas facilities

To make matters worse, an astrophysicist (who didn't wish to be identified) told this reporter that India's problem is compounded by the attitude of bureaucrats and administrators.

"They are close-minded regarding concepts like buying fractional time on



India's highest telescopes are at Hanle village in Ladakh. BY MOORTHY/THE HINDU

large telescopes or missions – measures that are not only essential to foster stronger international collaborations and keep us at the forefront of astronomy research, but also serve as a stop-gap arrangement till we have our own large telescopes," the astrophysicist said.

For far too long has the country relied on overseas facilities for high-resolution data and specialised equipment to do space science, including collaborative projects such as radio, optical, and space-based observations. Acquiring strong domestic capabilities in space science and astrophysics is thus imperative if India is to reduce its dependence on foreign observatories.

Steadily strengthened

Building large-scale, next-generation observatories for cutting-edge space research, however, involves overcoming formidable financial and technological hurdles. These challenges often require collaborative partnerships with international teams and pooling resources and expertise with them is often the only way for Indian scientists to participate in ambitious projects. Adequate funding, effective governance and partnership with domestic industry offer a realistic solution to shrug off this dependence on foreign facilities and research data.

Fortunately, India's astronomy and space research ecosystem is being steadily strengthened with the addition of cutting-edge technology platforms. These include optical and radio telescopes, such as the Giant Metrewave Radio Telescope (GMRT) near Pune, and data processing centres capable of AI-driven data analysis. These efforts, alongside the

A large chunk of the budgetary allocation for the Department of Space has been set aside for deep-space exploration and astrophysics, including to build two advanced telescope facilities

new budgetary push, could boost India's research capabilities, with the growing shift towards public-private partnerships in space research adding to the optimism. "Basic science and big budget experiments all over the world require funding from State agencies" Dr. Mookerjee said. "While there are many private enterprises in the space sector, proper channeling of their efforts and overall quality control and monitoring would require setting up of statutory bodies involving government agencies."

"In the past decade or so we have seen many startups in the space sector, often working in close collaboration with Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) experts," Abhinav Susobhanan, assistant professor of physics at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Thiruvananthapuram, said. "The Department of Space established the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre in 2020 to promote such partnerships. This is a positive sign as such partnerships will promote innovation and attract private investment in the space sector."

Sub-millimetre sky

For that to happen, however, policymakers should acknowledge "the imperative for strategic resource

allocation and collaborative initiatives to maximise the scientific output from the country's astronomical assets." But, he cautioned, "we also have to keep in mind that private interests may not always align with the interests of the nation as a whole."

An important upside of developing homegrown cutting-edge resources in space science is that it will encourage students to engage in advanced research in the country, arresting the steady brain drain to institutions abroad. But that has been easier said, with a lot of homework still being required before it becomes a reality. For instance, the GMRT is the world's largest radio telescope array operating at low frequencies and attracts astronomers from across the world. But in the absence of a comparable optical telescope in the country, Indian scientists are forced to stand in line for telescope time at foreign facilities, as they do for doing research in high frequency radio astronomy.

Similarly, India doesn't have any telescope that operates in the critical sub-millimetre wavelengths. "The sub-millimetre sky is a unique window for probing the architecture of the universe and structures within it, from the dusty sub-millimetre galaxies to the ringed nature of proto-stellar disks," Dr. Mookerjee said. "A proposal is in the pipeline and it is also a part of the Astronomy & Astrophysics Mega Science Vision 2035."

Only when such projects are realised can India's march towards becoming a leader in space exploration gather pace. (Prakash Chandra is a science writer, pratashiat@gmail.com)

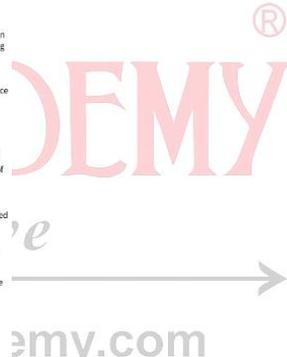
THE GIST

The Union Budget 2026-27 has earmarked ₹3,416.20 crore for the Department of Space which has brought some cheer to India's research community

A large chunk of the allocation has been reserved for building advanced telescopes and to upgrade two other facilities, which will improve space research capability and science outreach

However, experts raised concerns about a significant drop in expenditure, with the actual expense falling short of budgetary estimates

For far too long India has relied on overseas facilities for high-resolution data and specialised equipment to do space science, hence it is imperative to strengthen domestic facilities and reduce this dependence



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Strategic Infrastructure Projects

The budget prioritizes high-altitude, low-moisture sites in Ladakh, which offer "coronagraphic skies" ideal for high-resolution space study.

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Daily News Analysis

Project	Location	Purpose
30-m National Large Optical-Infrared Telescope (NLOT)	Hanle, Ladakh	Will be India's premier facility for high-resolution deep-space imaging.
National Large Solar Telescope (NLST)	Merak, Ladakh	A 2-meter class telescope to study solar magnetic fields; a ground-based partner to the Aditya-L1 mission.
Himalayan Chandra Telescope (HCT) Upgrades	Hanle, Ladakh	Modernizing control systems of the existing 2-m telescope to improve efficiency.
COSMOS-2 Planetarium	Amaravati, AP	Focused on science outreach and immersive astronomical education.

The "Spending Lag" & Bureaucratic Hurdles

Despite the increased allocation, experts have identified significant challenges in the research ecosystem:

The Expenditure Gap: Actual spending often falls short of budgetary estimates (Revised Estimates are frequently lower than Budget Estimates), leading to bottlenecks in multi-year projects.

Access Barriers: India currently lacks comparable optical or **sub-millimeter** telescopes. This forces Indian scientists to compete globally for "observation time" on foreign telescopes, where preference is often given to host-nation researchers.

Bureaucratic Rigidity: Administrators are often hesitant to "buy fractional time" on international missions—a standard global practice used as a stop-gap until domestic facilities are ready.

Roadmap: Astronomy & Astrophysics Mega Science Vision 2035

To address these gaps, the Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser (PSA) has formulated the **MSV-2035**.

Goal: Establish a 10-meter class telescope and sub-millimeter facilities within the next decade.

Collaboration: Promoting **Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)** through **IN-SPACE** to bring private investment into telescope hardware and AI-driven data analysis.

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Brain Drain: By building homegrown "cutting-edge" resources, India aims to retain top-tier talent who currently migrate to Western institutions for high-resolution data.

Conclusion

The 2026 Budget marks the beginning of India's "build phase" in space science. However, the transition from a "launch-heavy" agency to a "science-heavy" ecosystem requires more than just funds; it necessitates a streamlining of resources and a shift in administrative mindset to treat fundamental research as a long-term strategic asset rather than an optional expense.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Evaluate the strategic importance of high-altitude astronomical facilities in Ladakh for India's deep-space and solar research ambitions. (250 words)

Page 08 : GS II : Social Justice

In early 2026, the suicide of three sisters in Uttar Pradesh, linked to "screen addiction," prompted calls for a nationwide social media ban for those under 16, mirroring recent laws in **Australia** and proposed legislation in **Spain**. However, child rights advocates and digital experts caution against a "moral panic" response, suggesting that a ban might be a symbolic crackdown that fails to solve the actual crisis.

A social media ban will not save our children

On February 4, 2026, three sisters, aged 12, 14 and 16, ended their lives in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, leaving behind their family and a country struggling to comprehend the horror. Preliminary police reports suggest it to be a case of screen addiction and parental conflict. Politicians, parents and pundits have united in demanding swift action. The sentiment is understandable. When a child dies, we want someone to blame and, sometimes, something to ban. But beneath the fury lies a dangerous impulse: to solve a complex problem with a blunt instrument that absolves platforms of accountability while stripping young people of their digital rights.

The evidence linking heavy social media use to harm to adolescent mental health is beyond speculation. While a few outliers exist in scholarly literature, many meta-analyses and systematic reviews identify small but consistent associations between heavy social media use and increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, self-harm and body image dissatisfaction among teenagers, particularly girls. While most of these studies have not been conducted in India, they still serve as a note of caution on the effects of social media use.

An approach that will not work in India

The tragedy in Ghaziabad has coincided with a crescendo of government anxiety and regulatory intervention across the globe. Australia has a targeted ban, who many in India now point to as a template. In 2024, Australia passed a law prohibiting anyone under the age of 16 from holding accounts on 10 major platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat and X, which is enforced through mandatory age verification and backed by fines of up to \$50 million (Australian). The law came into force on December 10, 2025, making Australia the first country to truly pull the plug on under-16 social media accounts.

On February 3, 2026, the Prime Minister of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, announced plans to ban social media for those under 16, vowing to "protect them from the digital Wild West" and to hold executives criminally liable for algorithmic amplification of hate. These are emotionally satisfying responses. They also bear the familiar fingerprints of a moral panic. As Stanley Cohen showed more than 50 years ago, when society fails to solve complex social problems, they are labelled as vilified "folk devils" and met with disproportionate, symbolic crackdowns. For



Apar Gupta
is an advocate and the Founder Director of the Internet Freedom Foundation, India

India to copypaste this approach would be disastrous for four distinct reasons.

First, bans are technically porous and difficult to implement even if outsourced to social media companies themselves. Adolescents are often more digitally literate than the legislators regulating them. As seen in jurisdictions with strict age-gating, bans invariably trigger a mass migration to Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) or, worse, push young users from regulated platforms such as Instagram to encrypted, unmoderated corners of the dark web where grooming and extremism thrive unchecked. Some forms of enforcement, if linked to identity verification, may also pose the risk of connecting every social media account with a government ID, creating a mass surveillance framework.

Second, a blanket ban ignores the complexity of adolescent development. As noted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and some child rights bodies, social media is also a lifeline. For rural adolescents, urban slum dwellers, queer and differently-abled teens seeking peer support, these platforms are often their only window to a community where they feel seen.

Third, this approach suffers from a severe democratic deficit. In India, there is a chronic habit of making policy for young people without ever speaking to them. Have we asked what they would like?

Fourth, and most importantly, a social media ban will certainly calcify the gendered social inequalities that will prevent girls from lower income households, particularly young girls, from using the Internet for their social mobility and charting their future. Data from the National Sample Survey show that only 33.3% of women in India reported having ever used the Internet, compared to 57.1% of men. In patriarchal settings, where female Internet access is already viewed with suspicion, a government mandate to "police" age is likely to result in families just confiscating the device entirely from young girls.

What can be done

What, then, is the alternative? First, the government must abandon its addiction to censorship. It must stop relying on the blunt instrument of bans or centralising every government response within the "notice and takedown" regime of the IT Act, 2000. Instead, it must directly confront the economic power and technical architecture of Big Tech. We urgently need a sophisticated menu of legislative tools that

include a robust digital competition law and legally enforceable "duty of care" obligations towards minors, with provisions for monetary penalties. Crucially, these must be enforced by an independent, expert regulator, not by the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology that lacks expertise and is susceptible to political influence.

Second, India needs serious public funding for surveys and longitudinal research on how social media actually shapes children's well-being locally, across class, gender, caste and region. Young people must be at the centre of this policy process – from the design of the surveys to being active participants who shape its findings. We have already seen the folly of ignoring them. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, with its poorly designed "consent gating", will result either in false declarations or exclusion.

The issue of regulation

Finally, we should ask why our moral outrage is uniquely limited to social media? Do not any of these issues exist with Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots and its integration with social media platforms? Early research already links higher AI use in creating a "cognitive debt" that leads to weaker critical thinking. Relatedly, young people are already using generative AI tools for emotional and mental health advice. Recent reporting and litigation have highlighted serious child-safety failures in conversational AI systems, including sexualised interactions with minors and alleged links to self-harm and suicide. If the concern is about harm to children, regulation has to be consistent and our failure to consider AI regulation must be considered.

In the end, a ban might offer the comforting illusion of control – a way for our politicians to show they "did something" after the latest tragedy. But the price would be paid by the very young people whose rights and futures are ostensibly being defended. As media scholar Neil Postman, who began his career as a public schoolteacher noted, "I am not pro, or anti, technology. That would be stupid. For that would be like being pro, or anti, food."

The lesson for us as adults is to provide a healthy media ecology to our children rather than taking social media completely off the table. This is tougher work than a ban. But it requires us to confront our dissonance on the doctrine of tech-driven innovation that is exempt from regulation, where on one day we demonise social media and on another, worship AI.

A social media ban ignores complex realities when what is needed instead is a healthy media ecology

The Case Against a Blanket Ban

Advocates like Apar Gupta highlight four primary risks of a prohibitionist approach:

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Technical Porosity & Safety Risks: Digital-native adolescents often use VPNs to bypass age-gates. This moves them from regulated platforms (like Instagram) to **unmoderated, encrypted corners of the dark web**, increasing exposure to grooming and extremism.

The Digital Lifeline: For marginalized youth—including queer teens, rural students, or those with disabilities—social media is often their only access to supportive peer communities and information.

Deepening the Gender Divide: In India's patriarchal context, where female internet usage (33.3%) lags significantly behind male usage (57.1%), a "policing" mandate often results in families confiscating devices primarily from girls, stifling their social mobility.

Democratic Deficit: Policies are frequently made for young people without consulting them, ignoring their agency and specific needs.

Current Regulatory Framework in India

India has already begun implementing nuanced regulations rather than outright bans:

Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023: * Defines a "child" as anyone under 18.

Mandates **verifiable parental consent** before processing a minor's data.

Strictly prohibits **tracking, behavioral monitoring, and targeted advertising** directed at children.

IT Rules, 2021: Compels platforms to act as "intermediaries" with a "duty of care," requiring the removal of harmful content (like deepfakes or self-harm triggers) within 24 to 72 hours.

—**The "Age 18" Debate:** India's threshold of 18 is stricter than the EU's GDPR (13–16) and the US's COPPA (13), leading to concerns about "over-regulating" older teenagers who use the internet for education and career growth.

Proposed Alternatives to a Ban

Instead of censorship, experts recommend a "sophisticated menu" of legislative and social tools:

Enforceable "Duty of Care": Shifting the burden from parents to platforms, requiring Big Tech to redesign algorithms to be less addictive.

Independent Regulation: Moving oversight from political bureaucracies to an expert-led regulator.

Local Longitudinal Research: Funding studies on how social media impacts Indian children across different castes, classes, and regions, rather than relying solely on Western data.

Media Ecology: Fostering digital literacy in schools so children can navigate the "digital Wild West" with resilience rather than being locked out of it.

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Conclusion

A social media ban offers a "comforting illusion of control" for policymakers but risks stripping minors of their digital rights. The focus must shift from **policing screens** to **regulating platform architecture**. By enforcing transparency in algorithms and ensuring robust data protection, India can create a "healthy media ecology" that protects children without disconnecting them from the modern world.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "Moral panic often substitutes evidence-based policymaking." Examine this statement in the context of rising concerns over screen addiction and youth suicides in India. (150 words)



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Page 13 : GS III : Agriculture

India is the world's second-largest producer of fruits and vegetables, yet it loses over ₹1.5 trillion annually due to post-harvest inefficiencies. The 2026-27 economic outlook highlights cold chain logistics as "economic plumbing"—a vital infrastructure that converts agricultural waste into wealth and ensures the efficacy of life-saving vaccines.

The Strategic Shift: From Volume to Value

Traditionally, India's cold chain was dominated by standalone cold storages (mostly for potatoes). The new era (2025–2033) focuses on **Integrated Logistics**:

End-to-End Connectivity: Moving away from isolated warehouses to a seamless "farm-to-fork" link involving pre-cooling, refrigerated transport (reefers), and last-mile delivery.

Tech-Driven Compliance: Adoption of "Cold Chain 4.0"—using IoT-enabled sensors, AI for predictive maintenance, and blockchain for real-time temperature tracking.

Multi-Commodity Facilities: Warehouses that can simultaneously store dairy, meat, and pharmaceuticals in separate temperature zones (ranging from -25°C to +15°C).

Key Growth Drivers

Pharmaceutical Global Hub: India's role as the "Pharmacy of the World" requires "Precision Process Cooling" for high-value biologics and vaccines.

Changing Consumption: The rise of **Quick Service Restaurants (QSRs)**, e-grocery (BigBasket, Blinkit), and processed "Ready-to-Eat" meals has made temperature control a non-negotiable consumer demand.

E-commerce Boom: Online grocery is expected to grow at a CAGR of **33%** through 2027, necessitating decentralized mini-cold hubs in urban centers.

Government Policy & Support

The government is incentivizing the sector through several flagship schemes:

Scheme	Focus Area	Key Benefits
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Preserving the value of goods and profitability with cold chain



Huge potential: India's cold chain market is set to jump from around \$13 billion to \$75 billion. THE HINDU

T. E. Raja Simhan

A study by market intelligence platform Grand View Horizon finds that, by 2033, India's cold chain market is set to jump from around \$13 billion to \$75 billion, registering nearly 25% annual growth.

Often invisible to consumers, the country's cold chain ecosystem is on the brink of a strategic transformation. The surging demand for perishables (dairy, agri produce, and meat), high-value medicines, and e-grocery convenience is colliding with a fragmented legacy system, says a report by Amicus Growth Advisors.

Fewer losses, fresher goods
 Billions in investment are chasing the promise of fewer losses and fresher goods. The real money will flow to players who knit together end-to-end cold logistics, rather than those merely adding standalone capacity. In short, integrated, tech-driven, compliance-led platforms will command premiums.

Sanjeev Jain, Managing Partner, Amicus Growth Advisors, says India feeds more people than any other democracy on earth. It supplies vaccines to the world. It grows, processes, exports, and consumes one of the most diverse baskets of food anywhere. And yet, somewhere between the farm, the factory, the hospital, and the home, value quietly melts away. Cold chain logistics is the invisible line that decides whether the value is preserved or lost.

Economic plumbing
 Additionally, cold chain is economic plumbing as it determines farmer income, food safety, export competitiveness, pharmaceutical efficacy and, increasingly, business valuation. For agriculture, cold chains are the difference between distress sale and market power. Between waste and wealth. Between volatility and stability. For dairy, they are the backbone that enables daily freshness at national scale. For pharmaceuticals and vaccines, they are the mandatory line between compliance and catastrophe.

Consumption patterns are changing. Processed food, organised retail, e-grocery, QSRs, and biologics are no longer niche. At the same time, regulation is tightening, capital is becoming more discerning, and customers are no longer forgiving of failures that were once considered "operational realities", he said.

The report covers every aspect of cold chain — from temperature classes to growth enablers, policies (such as subsidies under Kisan Sampada) and regulation.

It says the winners will be those who treat cold chain as a strategic platform: locking in quality end-to-end, capturing data and reliability premiums, and partnering with global integrators. Those who act now will define India's cold chain renaissance.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

Daily News Analysis

Scheme	Focus Area	Key Benefits
PM Kisan SAMPADA Yojana	Integrated Cold Chain & Value Addition	Up to 35%–50% credit-linked subsidy for infrastructure.
Operation Greens	Perishables (TOP to TOTAL)	Stabilizing supply and prices of fruits and vegetables through better storage.
Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF)	Post-harvest Management	Interest subvention of 3% on loans up to ₹2 crore.
Production Linked Incentive (PLI)	Food Processing	Incentivizing manufacturing of ready-to-eat and organic products.

Challenges to Overcome

Energy Dependency: Cold chains are power-intensive. Inconsistent electricity in rural areas remains a bottleneck, pushing the industry toward **Solar-Powered Cold Storage**.

High Operational Costs: Fuel accounts for a massive portion of reefer transport costs, making Indian cold logistics more expensive than global averages.

Skilled Manpower: A significant gap exists in technicians trained to handle advanced "precision-cooling" equipment and IoT systems.

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Conclusion

The transformation of the cold chain is the final frontier in doubling farmers' income and securing India's position in the global supply chain. By 2026, the industry is expected to see a "separation" where tech-compliant, integrated players consolidate the market. For India, a robust cold chain isn't just a business opportunity; it is a **national imperative** for sustainability, health, and economic resilience.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Cold chain logistics has been described as the "economic plumbing" of a modern economy. Discuss this statement in the context of food security, pharmaceutical supply chains, and public health in India. (250 words)

Myanmar's military-scripted polls, India's strategic bind

Five years after the February 1, 2021 coup, Myanmar's military sought to manufacture political normalcy through elections held in three phases between late December 2025 and January 2026. Predictably, the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won. The outcome was barely a surprise since voting was permitted in only 265 of the country's 330 townships, with a controlled political participation.

Polling was largely confined to urban wards, as most rural areas remain under resistance influence. The junta claimed an overall voter turnout of around 55% – roughly 13.14 million of 24 million eligible voters. This sharp decline, from the roughly 70% turnout recorded in 2015 and 2020, reflects not voter apathy, but widespread rejection of a military-scripted political exercise.

The credibility deficit was compounded by the junta-appointed Union Election Commission dissolving several opposition parties, including the National League for Democracy (NLD), the Arakan National Party, and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, with senior leaders jailed. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing fielded dozens of serving and retired military figures under the USDP banner, which has now claimed sweeping victories. The new Parliament is slated to be formed within two months.

Elections amidst war; India's response

Since the coup, at least 7,738 people, including activists, journalists, and civilians, have been killed, while over 30,000 have been arrested. Of these, 22,767 remain in detention, including NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and former president U Win Myint, and 11,497 have been sentenced, often on politically motivated charges. More than 1,13,000 houses and structures have been destroyed, particularly in Sagaing and Magway.

The regime's brutality has fuelled the growth of resistance groups, notably the People's Defence Forces, which now operate alongside long-established ethnic armed organisations and control large swathes of territory, including 91 towns.

Despite the elections, these groups exert significant influence, constraining the USDP and



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India will have to manage its ties with the regime, balancing principles with pragmatism

suggesting that the conflict is likely to intensify.

For India, Myanmar is both a strategic neighbour and a gateway to Southeast Asia, crucial for its Act East Policy. The elections, therefore, continue to pose a long-standing dilemma for New Delhi's security and connectivity interests, without legitimising a deeply contested political mechanism.

In repeated statements in December 2025 and January 2026, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal has reiterated that India supports Myanmar's democratic transition and that any electoral process must be free, fair and inclusive, with the participation of all political stakeholders. This carefully calibrated language reflects India's attempt to uphold democratic principles while avoiding a complete diplomatic rupture with Naypyitaw. During the same period, New Delhi also clarified that any Indians who had visited Myanmar during the election process had done so in their personal capacity, signalling a distance and absence from the political exercise.

High-level engagement has continued alongside this calibrated rhetoric. On the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in August 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to review bilateral ties and explore avenues for cooperation. While reiterating India's readiness to support Myanmar's developmental needs, the Prime Minister also emphasised the importance of conducting free, fair, and inclusive elections involving all stakeholders. The message was clear: engagement would continue, but without explicit political endorsement.

Amidst this, India has continued to play its humanitarian role by sending relief teams, humanitarian and medical assistance, and the establishment of a temporary field hospital under Operation Brahma during the March 2025 earthquake, which allowed New Delhi to remain engaged while avoiding legitimisation of the regime.

Implications for India

Myanmar shares a 1,643-kilometre border with four of India's northeastern States, making instability across the frontier inseparable from

India's internal security. Violence and state collapse have already triggered refugee inflows into the nation. India currently hosts 90,100 displaced Myanmar nationals in Mizoram and Manipur. The absence of a coherent national refugee policy places disproportionate burdens on State governments, thus exposing faultlines in this respect. Continued post-election instability is likely to sustain such movements.

Indian-backed projects, including the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, have faced repeated delays due to insecurity in conflict-affected regions. The junta's claims of post-election normalisation will be difficult to translate into improved implementation conditions, forcing New Delhi to reassess timelines, risk exposure and engagement strategies.

Moreover, transnational security threats – for instance, the proliferation of narcotics and human trafficking networks – have accelerated amid weakened border controls and fragmented authority. Of particular concern is the rapid expansion of cyber scam centres and cyber slavery networks operating in border conflict zones in Myanmar, from where 2,165 Indians have been rescued since 2022, but more still remain within the shackles. These developments present emerging non-traditional security challenges, underscoring the need for coordinated and clearer domestic and regional policy responses.

The path for New Delhi

As western and regional blocs such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) refuse to recognise the election outcomes for now, it becomes essential for India to maintain its balanced approach. New Delhi is likely to sustain limited engagement with the regime in power to protect core interests, while simultaneously maintaining contacts with local actors, which it has already been doing in recent times.

Myanmar's elections have, therefore, not marked a turning point. For India, they underline a hard truth: managing relations with a fractured neighbour will require balancing principles with pragmatism – at a time when neither offers an easy exit.

GS Paper II : International Relations

UPSC Mains Practice Question: The 2025–26 elections held by Myanmar's military regime have failed to restore political legitimacy. Critically examine the credibility of these elections and their implications for democratic transition in Myanmar. **(250 Words)**

Context :

Myanmar’s junta held elections from **December 28, 2025, to January 25, 2026**, in an attempt to manufacture political normalcy. The military-aligned **Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)** won a predictable majority. However, the international community, including India, remains skeptical as the process excluded the dissolved opposition (NLD), faced low turnout, and excluded 67 townships due to active conflict.

The Electoral Snapshot (2025–26)

Feature	Details
Outcome	USDP victory ; won 232 of 263 lower house seats and 109 upper house seats.
Turnout	Claimed 55% (approx. 13 million voters), down from 70% in 2015/2020.
Limitations	Voting held in only 265 of 330 townships ; mostly urban areas.
Credibility	Main opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) dissolved; leaders jailed.

Strategic and Humanitarian Crisis

The post-coup era has been defined by state fragmentation and human suffering:

Casualties: Over **7,700 killed** and 30,000+ arrested since February 2021.

Internal Displacement: Resistance groups (PDFs) and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) now control **91 towns**, leading to intensified civil war.

Refugee Influx: India currently hosts **90,100 displaced Myanmar nationals** in Mizoram and Manipur, straining local resources.

Cyber Slavery: A new non-traditional threat has emerged in border zones. As of February 2026, the Indian government confirmed that **2,168 Indians have been rescued** from Myanmar's cyber scam centers since 2022.

India’s Calibrated Response

India’s stance remains "balanced but distanced":

Support for Democracy: MEA Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal reiterated that any process must be **free, fair, and inclusive**.

Calibrated Engagement: PM Modi met Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in August 2025 (SCO sidelines) to discuss ties but withheld explicit political endorsement of the polls.

Humanitarian Role: India launched **Operation Brahma** in March 2025 to provide earthquake relief, maintaining a "people-to-people" bridge without legitimizing the junta.

Security Interests: Fencing the 1,643-km border and ending the **Free Movement Regime (FMR)** reflect New Delhi’s priority to insulate the Northeast from Myanmar’s instability.

Impact on Connectivity Projects

Strategic projects remain in "wait-and-watch" mode due to security risks:

Kaladan Multi-Modal Project: Now expected to be fully operational only by **2027**.

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Trilateral Highway: Face continued delays as several sections pass through resistance-controlled or conflict-heavy territories.

Conclusion

The 2026 elections have not provided a "turning point" for Myanmar's stability. For India, the path forward remains a difficult tightrope walk. New Delhi must protect its border security and infrastructure investments by dealing with the junta, while simultaneously acknowledging the resistance groups that control much of the frontier. Pragmatism dictates engagement, but lasting stability in the Northeast depends on a truly inclusive democratic settlement in Naypyidaw.
