

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

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Page 01 :GS II : International Relations/ Prelims Exam

The signing of the India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) marks a watershed moment in bilateral relations, transitioning from a purely sectoral engagement to a comprehensive economic partnership. Concluded in a record nine months, the pact underscores a shared strategic vision in the Indo-Pacific. It aims to double bilateral trade to **\$5 billion** within five years and secures a landmark **\$20 billion investment commitment** from New Zealand into India over the next 15 years.

New Zealand, India to sign free trade pact today; tariffs to be removed on all exports

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

India and New Zealand will on Monday sign a Free Trade Agreement that will remove tariffs on 100% of India's exports to New Zealand, and either sharply reduce or remove tariffs on 95% of current imports from that country.

Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal on Saturday took to social media to welcome Todd McClay, New Zealand's Minister for Trade & Investment, to New Delhi, ahead of the signing of the pact.

"As we approach the #IndiaNZFTA signing on April 27th, his visit marks a defining moment in our bilateral journey, reflecting the trust, shared values, and common vision that underpin our partnership for sustainable economic



Union Minister Piyush Goyal welcomes Todd McClay, New Zealand's Minister for Trade and Investment on Friday. X/@PIYUSHGOYAL

growth, driving prosperity for both our nations," he said.

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

The deal will provide India with immediate duty-free access on 100% of tariff lines. This is down from the 10% tariff New Zealand currently levies on about 450 tariff lines that India exports, including textiles and apparel products, leather and headgear, carpets, and auto

mobiles and auto components. On average, New Zealand levied a tariff of 2.2% in 2025, which will come down to zero under the agreement.

The pact between the countries is one of the fastest-negotiated trade agreements that India has entered into, with negotiations being announced in March 2025 and concluding in December.

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

and their products.

The FTA includes a provision wherein New Zealand will invest \$20 billion in India over 15 years.

The deal also includes provisions relating to the mobility of working professionals and students. Indian students can work up to 20 hours per week while studying in New Zealand, with extended post-study work visas.

India has offered New Zealand exporters market access in 70.03% of the tariff lines with 30% of these lines seeing tariffs being immediately removed while the rest will see a phased removals or reductions.

According to the New Zealand government, 95% of the country's current exports will see tariffs either reduced to zero or sharply reduced.

Key Highlights of the Agreement

1. Trade in Goods: Tariff Liberalization

- **For India:** Immediate **duty-free access (100% of tariff lines)** for Indian exports. This is particularly beneficial for labor-intensive sectors like textiles, apparel, leather, footwear, and pharmaceuticals, which previously faced tariffs up to 10%.
- **For New Zealand:** India has offered market access in **70.03% of its tariff lines**. While 30% see immediate removal, others face phased reductions. Key imports like wool, coal, wood, and sheep meat will see significant duty cuts.

2. The "Defensive" List: Protecting Sensitive Sectors

India has successfully maintained a "negative list" to protect domestic livelihoods, particularly in agriculture:

- **Dairy:** Entirely excluded (milk, cream, cheese, etc.) to protect India's small-scale dairy farmers.
- **Agriculture:** Onions, pulses (chana, peas), sugar, and edible oils remain protected.

3. Services and Labor Mobility

This is a cornerstone of the deal, focusing on "brain gain" and professional exchange:

- **Professional Visas:** A new temporary employment visa pathway for **5,000 Indian professionals** annually (valid for up to 3 years) across 118 sectors.
- **Student Benefits:** Indian students can work 20 hours/week with extended post-study work visas (up to 4 years for PhDs).
- **Traditional Medicine:** For the first time, New Zealand has included an annex on **AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga)**, recognizing Indian traditional knowledge systems.

4. Investment and Tech Transfer

- **Investment:** A \$20 billion commitment over 15 years into Indian infrastructure and manufacturing.
- **Agri-Tech Action Plan:** Collaboration on kiwifruit, apples, and honey to help Indian farmers improve yields and supply chain efficiency through "Centres of Excellence."

Strategic Analysis for UPSC

A. Strategic Significance

- **Indo-Pacific Pivot:** By signing this FTA, India has now secured economic pacts with almost all major RCEP members (except China) individually, reinforcing its "Act East" and "Indo-Pacific" presence without joining the RCEP bloc.
- **Diversification:** Amidst global supply chain volatility, this deal helps India diversify its trade partners in the Oceania region, complementing the existing ECTA with Australia.

B. Economic Implications

- **Pharma Boost:** The agreement enables the acceptance of Indian GMP (Good Manufacturing Practice) reports, fast-tracking Indian drug entries into the New Zealand market.
- **Manufacturing:** Zero-duty access for automobiles and engineering goods supports the "Make in India" initiative for global exports.

C. Challenges and Concerns

Daily News Analysis

- **Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs):** While tariffs are gone, stringent Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures in New Zealand could still act as hurdles for Indian agri-exports.
- **Trade Balance:** Historically, India has a trade deficit with many FTA partners; the challenge lies in ensuring Indian MSMEs are "export-ready" to utilize the 100% duty-free access.

Conclusion

The India-New Zealand FTA is a "New Age" trade agreement that balances ambitious market access with the pragmatic protection of sensitive domestic sectors like dairy. Beyond mere trade in goods, the inclusion of labor mobility, investment guarantees, and the recognition of AYUSH reflects India's growing "soft power" and its evolution as a "trusted partner" in the global rules-based order. The success of this pact will ultimately depend on how effectively Indian exporters can navigate non-tariff barriers and leverage New Zealand's investment for domestic infrastructure.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques:The term "Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures" often seen in trade agreements refers to:

- (a) Rules for digital trade
- (b) Health and safety standards for food and agricultural products
- (c) Tariff reduction schedules
- (d) Investment protection clauses

Ans: d)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Examine how Free Trade Agreements like the India–New Zealand FTA balance economic liberalization with the protection of domestic interests. **(150 Words)**

Page 04: GS II : Polity & Governance / Prelims Exam

The Supreme Court, in an order dated April 13, 2026, has expanded the horizon of Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty) to include the "Right to Safe Passage on Highways." Prompted by tragic accidents in Rajasthan and Telangana, the court emphasized that high-speed corridors must not transform into "corridors of peril" due to administrative negligence.

'Right to safe travel on highways part of right to life'

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has declared that the safety of commuters against road accidents and the right to safe passage on highways are part of the fundamental right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution.

"National Highways constitute approximately 2% of India's total road length but account for nearly 30% of all road fatalities. A road, particularly a high-speed expressway, must not become a corri-

The loss of life to avoidable hazards points at failure of the state's protective umbrella, says SC

dor of peril due to administrative lethargy or infrastructural gaps. The loss of even a single life to avoidable hazards like illegal parking or blackspots, etc., represents a failure of the state's protective umbrella," a Bench of Justices J.K. Maheshwari and Atul S. Chandurkar observed in

an April 13 order. The court issued a series of directions, including the immediate prohibition on the construction or operation of any commercial structure within the right-of-way of any National Highway. The order also directed that vehicles should park/stop only at designated areas.

The order arose from a *suo motu* case based on the loss of a total of 34 lives in successive road accidents on November 2 and November 3 last year in Rajasthan and Telangana.

Key Judicial Observations

1. The Highway Paradox

The Bench highlighted a stark statistical reality:

Daily News Analysis

- **Road Density vs. Fatalities:** National Highways (NH) make up only **2%** of India's road network but are responsible for **30%** of total road fatalities.
- **State Responsibility:** The court noted that the state's duty to protect life under Article 21 extends to ensuring that infrastructure designed for speed is not compromised by avoidable hazards.

2. Defining "Avoidable Hazards"

The court identified several "blackspots" and systemic failures that lead to loss of life:

- **Illegal Parking:** Stationary vehicles on high-speed lanes.
- **Unauthorized Structures:** Commercial buildings or encroachments within the "Right of Way" (ROW).
- **Administrative Lethargy:** Failure of agencies like NHAI to rectify known design flaws.

Major Directives Issued

Directive	Objective
Prohibition of Commercial Encroachment	Immediate ban on construction/operation of any commercial structure within the Right-of-Way.
Designated Parking Only	Strict enforcement ensuring vehicles stop only at authorized lay-bys or rest areas.
Removal of Blackspots	Mandating a time-bound audit and engineering fix for accident-prone zones.
Suo Motu Accountability	Highway authorities can now be held directly liable for accidents caused by poor maintenance or illegal obstructions.

Significance for UPSC Aspirants

A. Judicial Activism and Article 21

This judgment follows the trend of the Indian Judiciary expanding Article 21 to include the right to a clean environment, right to sleep, and now, **right to safe travel**. It reinforces the concept of **Substantive Due Process**, where the law must not only exist but must also be implemented in a way that protects the dignity and life of citizens.

B. Infrastructure Governance

The ruling puts immense pressure on the **National Highways Authority of India (NHAI)** and the **Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH)**. It shifts the focus from "Quantity" (km of roads built per day) to "Quality and Safety" (reduction in fatalities).

C. The "Golden Hour" and Emergency Care

While the text focuses on safety, the broader legal implication links to the **Justice J.S. Verma Committee** recommendations and the **Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act 2019**, emphasizing that safe passage includes both accident prevention and post-accident trauma care.

Conclusion

By linking highway safety to the Right to Life, the Supreme Court has provided citizens with a powerful legal tool to demand better infrastructure. This "Constitutionalization" of road safety ensures that administrative lethargy is no longer just a management issue, but a violation of fundamental rights. For India to realize its dream of world-class infrastructure, the "Safe Systems Approach"—where human error is anticipated and road design minimizes the impact of that error—must now be the legal standard.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The term "Right of Way (ROW)" in the context of highways refers to:

- (a) The right of citizens to use highways freely
- (b) The designated land area reserved for road infrastructure and associated facilities
- (c) The legal right to claim compensation after accidents
- (d) The priority given to emergency vehicles

Ans:b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "The expansion of Article 21 reflects the evolving nature of fundamental rights in India." Discuss in the context of the Supreme Court's recognition of the "Right to Safe Passage on Highways." (150 Words)



The **A4WaterPolicy** project in the water-stressed districts of **Sirohi and Pali, Rajasthan**, demonstrates a move from "Information Push" to "**Active Listening.**" By utilizing AI to bridge the gap between rural communities and local institutions, the project transformed passive beneficiaries into active co-designers of water policy.

How AI helped community-led development in Rajasthan

A project to improve water resilience in two Rajasthan districts strengthened existing government efforts by using AI to improve last-mile responsiveness. The application was also lightweight enough to sit inside any large programme that depends on frontline behaviour change and local coordination

Suchiradipha Bhattacharjee
Alan Nicol

India is in an artificial intelligence (AI) moment. Across agriculture, health, finance, and governance, the race is on to deploy AI-enabled services that reach the last mile. Chatbots answer farmer queries. Agentic tools navigate entitlement schemes. And advisory platforms push the right information to the right person (presumably) at the right time.

Many of these tools share a similar logic. While exceptions exist, they are often designed around the assumption that communities have an information deficit that AI can fill. But what if that's not all communities need?

In public services, the gap is not always between people and information. It is often between people and the local institutions meant to serve them. India's villages are shaped by the complexities of caste, class, gender, and land ownership. Numbers alone cannot track what actually makes an intervention work. Why a volunteer stops showing up, what makes a woman hesitate to speak in a Gram Sabha, and why an approved plan isn't being implemented rarely makes it back to the people designing and funding these programmes.

This is not because institutions don't want qualitative information. In many cases, they simply lack the means, time, and resources to consistently gather it at scale.

Different question for AI
The authors designed a pilot project, called A4WaterPolicy, in the water-stressed Sirohi and Pali districts of Rajasthan. And rather than deploy AI to push information onwards, the project used it to listen.

Working with a field partner, Centre for Microfinance (CMF), and technology partner Colectiv, an AI model conducted 352 interviews across 50 villages in six months. The team had trained the model using a brief of the programme context and the questions it needed to know.

The AI chatbot then held 20-minute WhatsApp conversations in Hindi and local dialects via voice notes or text with 'Pani Mitras' (community volunteer water champions), Panchayat leaders, and CMF's frontline staff. WhatsApp conversations were adapted to each respondent on the fly. The model finally translated anonymised transcripts and organised them thematically, after which the field and research team reviewed and validated them.

The answers revealed three things:
(i) **Pride in the results:** "Water level in my village, which was at 150 feet, has now come to below 100 feet. This is a matter of great pride for me".

(ii) **The double burden for women:** "I manage my family by waking up early,



Technology must empower the human intermediary, like the community volunteer water champions in the A4WaterPolicy project, rather than replace them. GETTY IMAGES

then I visit other women in the village to discuss water-related issues. After returning home, I resume my household work", and

(iii) **Funding and approval delays:** "Because of delayed approval of proposals in the Panchayat department, we could not complete the work on time".

The project then deployed 'Pani Mitras' to address these issues. During the project's structured workshops to share and discuss findings with respondents, called 'Pause and Reflect' sessions, participants validated some interpretations and pushed back on others. Mainly, they said their limited understanding of Panchayat procedures and government schemes was a challenge.

In reply, CMF redesigned its training programme mid-cycle to add a Panchayat Raj orientation programme and structured workshops with block level officials from rural development, agriculture, and water resources departments. This pivot was not part of the original plan. It happened because the AI model helped the project turn insights around quickly enough to act within the same programme cycle.

Follow-up interviews with 'Pani Mitras' three months after the workshops found that more than half of the community members had since engaged directly with government officials – something many had hesitated to do before.

"They reported more confidence navigating scheme application processes and mentioned the feedback had prompted their Panchayat or department

The A4WaterPolicy pilot succeeded not just because of the algorithms used but also because its organisers budgeted time, funds, and people to return findings to respondents and co-develop follow-up actions

to act more quickly.

Listening with intent

There is an important distinction here: responsive systems and actively listening systems are not the same thing. The former takes community input as a signal and returns an answer. The latter is shaped by what it hears and the community moves from being a passive beneficiary to an active co-designer.

In this pilot, AI made active listening possible in three ways. First, a voice-enabled WhatsApp channel gave 'Pani Mitras' a private space to speak freely. As one respondent put it, "When a person is in front of you, you feel hesitant. On your own phone, there's no hesitation". Second, the AI model identified recurring themes across 352 conversations without requiring weeks of manual coding. Third, because the findings were synthesised within weeks, the implementing team could redesign training mid-cycle. Traditional monitoring can't easily provide such responsiveness.

The A4WaterPolicy pilot succeeded not just because of the algorithms used but also because its organisers budgeted time, funds, and people to return findings

to respondents and co-develop follow-up actions. CMF had also spent years working in these villages, identifying and training the 'Pani Mitras'. During the interviews, their staff facilitated access to shared devices for participants without smartphones, helped navigate connectivity problems, and ensured the 'Pause and Reflect' sessions were genuine deliberations. The AI could listen at scale precisely because human relationships had already created the conditions necessary for honest conversations.

Empower, not replace

The digital divide is real and manifests in gender, class, and caste-based differences, and any honest conversation about AI and the last mile must reckon with this reality. Technology must empower the human intermediary, like the 'Pani Mitras', rather than replace them. This was not a one-off pilot from Rajasthan. The approach strengthened and complemented existing government efforts by enhancing feedback loops and improving last-mile responsiveness. It was also lightweight enough to sit inside any large programme that depends on frontline behaviour change and local coordination.

Policies, programmes, and systems like Jal Jeevan Mission, VB-G RAM G, and sectoral extension systems all include such last-mile implementation.

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THE GIST

The authors designed a pilot project, called A4WaterPolicy, in the water-stressed Sirohi and Pali districts of Rajasthan

The AI chatbot held 20-minute WhatsApp conversations in Hindi and local dialects via voice notes or text with 'Pani Mitras' (community volunteer water champions), Panchayat leaders, and CMF's frontline staff

The AI could listen at scale precisely because human relationships had already created the conditions necessary for honest conversations

The Core Problem: The "Information Deficit" Fallacy

Traditional AI interventions assume that rural communities simply lack information. However, the real barriers are often systemic:

- **Social Complexity:** Caste, class, and gender dynamics influence who speaks in a Gram Sabha.
- **Institutional Gaps:** A disconnect between the approval of a plan and its actual implementation.
- **Qualitative Blindness:** Traditional data collection (numbers/stats) fails to capture why a volunteer stops working or why a woman hesitates to participate.

How the AI Model Worked

The project used a partnership between the **Centre for Microfinance (CmF)** and **Colectiv** to create a feedback loop that was both scalable and intimate.

1. The Interaction Layer

- **Platform:** WhatsApp-based voice notes and text in Hindi and local dialects.
- **Participants:** 352 interviews with '**Pani Mitras**' (Water Champions), Panchayat leaders, and frontline staff.
- **Privacy Advantage:** Respondents reported feeling less "hesitant" speaking to a phone than to a human interviewer, leading to more honest feedback.

2. The Analytical Layer

- **Synthesis:** The AI translated and organized anonymized transcripts thematically within weeks.
- **Speed:** Traditional manual coding of 350+ interviews would take months; AI provided insights in "real-time," allowing for **mid-cycle pivots** in the program.

Key Insights & Programmatic Pivots

The AI revealed three critical "ground truths" that led to immediate changes:

Insight Gathered	The "Pivot" (Action Taken)
Double Burden: Women volunteers struggled to balance household chores with water advocacy.	Program scheduling and support structures were adjusted to respect women's time.
Bureaucratic Delays: Funding and approvals were stuck at the Panchayat level.	CmF redesigned its training to include a Panchayati Raj orientation .
Knowledge Gap: 'Pani Mitras' lacked confidence in navigating government schemes.	Structured workshops were held with block-level officials from Agriculture and Water departments.

Significance for Governance

1. Community-Led Development (GS-II)

The project shifted the community's role from "passive beneficiary" to "**active co-designer**." Three months after the AI-driven workshops, over 50% of community members engaged directly with government officials—a massive jump in **civic agency**.

2. Strengthening Decentralization (GS-II)

By identifying "delayed approvals" as a bottleneck, the AI helped improve the efficiency of the **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)**. It provided a "bottom-up" data stream to the "top-down" planning process.

3. Human-Centric AI (GS-III)

The project proves that technology should **empower human intermediaries**, not replace them. The AI only worked because CmF had already built trust through years of field presence. This is a vital lesson for the **National Strategy for AI (#AIforAll)**.

Conclusion

The Rajasthan pilot proves that AI's greatest value in development might not be its ability to talk, but its ability to **listen at scale**. It offers a "lightweight" template that can be integrated into massive national missions like the **Jal Jeevan Mission** or the **Aspirational Districts Programme**. As India navigates its "AI moment," this model ensures that the "last mile" is not just reached, but heard.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The term "Information Deficit Fallacy" refers to:

- (a) Lack of digital infrastructure in rural areas
- (b) The assumption that development problems arise mainly due to lack of information
- (c) Inadequate funding for AI-based projects
- (d) Failure of data collection technologies

Ans:b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques:Examine the role of community participation in improving the effectiveness of decentralized governance institutions such as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). **(150 Words)**

Page 08 GS II : International Relations / Prelims Exam

On **April 26, 2026**, the United States allowed the sanctions waiver for Iran's **Chabahar Port** to lapse. This move places India at a "turning point": it must either risk secondary U.S. sanctions by continuing its \$620 million investment or abandon a project that has been a cornerstone of its "Connect Central Asia" policy for over two decades.

The Evolution of the Chabahar Project

The project has survived multiple geopolitical shifts but has consistently been hampered by U.S.-Iran tensions:

- **2003 (The Genesis):** PM Vajpayee signed the first MoU, envisioning Chabahar as a gateway to Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan.
- **2003–2015 (The Stagnation):** U.S. pressure regarding Iran's nuclear program led to significant construction delays.
- **2016 (The Trilateral Pact):** Following the JCPOA (Iran Nuclear Deal), PM Modi signed a landmark agreement with Iran and Afghanistan to develop the **Shahid Beheshti terminal**.
- **2018–2024 (The "Carve-out" Era):** After the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA, India was forced to stop oil imports but secured a specific "carve-out" for Chabahar to facilitate humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.
- **2025–2026 (The Winding Down):** Under renewed "maximum pressure" from the Trump administration, India began withdrawing personnel and considers transferring its stake to an Iranian entity.

Strategic Implications: The "Slicing" of Autonomy

The editorial argues that the Chabahar issue is not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern where the U.S. influences India's sovereign decisions:

1. Geopolitical Connectivity

Abandoning Chabahar effectively ends India's direct link to the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)**. This leaves Central Asia more dependent on China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** and leaves India without a viable land route to Afghanistan.

2. The Energy & Trade Diktat

India has previously complied with U.S. demands to stop buying oil from:

- **Iran** (formerly a top 3 supplier).

Turning point

The U.S. is slicing away at India's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy

The U.S. has allowed its waiver of sanctions on Iran's Chabahar port to lapse on Sunday (April 26), indicating that India is now at a crossroads on how to proceed with the port as a key connectivity initiative. Barring a belated waiver renewal, New Delhi must choose between accepting sanctions and abandoning its \$620 million investment, or proceeding with the project and risk strict U.S. sanctions. India's "start-stop" engagement with Iran on developing a facility at the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar goes back decades, and Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee signed an MoU for the project in 2003. However, U.S. pressure on India to postpone plans aimed at stopping Iran's nuclear programme led to construction delays. The Manmohan Singh government was unable to make much progress either, but continued work on the Zaranj-Delaram highway to connect the Iran-Afghanistan border crossing to Kabul. After the 2015 JCPOA, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government signed a trilateral agreement with Iran and Afghanistan to advance trade and aid via Chabahar port and a highway into Afghanistan. Chabahar's importance grew as ties with Pakistan deteriorated and it restricted India's transit access to Afghanistan. However, fate intervened again as U.S. President Donald Trump walked out of the JCPOA, and began a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran by re-implementing all sanctions. While India was forced by the U.S. to give up Iranian oil imports, and plans for the rail line, the U.S. built a "carve-out" for Chabahar, allowing India to send wheat and medical supplies to Afghanistan. That carve-out is now at an end, with the Trump administration giving Delhi until this month to "wind-down" its operations. Since November 2025, India has withdrawn personnel from Chabahar, prepaid its \$120 million investment commitment, and is considering transferring its stake in the Shahid Beheshti Terminal to an Iranian company, with the option of returning later.

The West Asia war has complicated the situation, and it is unclear when, if ever, India will be able to re-engage with Iran or rebuild Chabahar after the conflict. Temporarily dropping the project may seem pragmatic. However, Chabahar is just one of several India's independent decisions that the U.S. has thwarted; there have been diktats to stop buying oil from Iran, Venezuela, and Russia. Mr. Trump has threatened sanctions on all trade with Iran, and on BRICS grouping members; the U.S.'s seemingly insatiable demands may also extend to India's engagement with other countries. Giving in on Chabahar will not just end India's connectivity plans with Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan. It will damage its claims of sovereign autonomy, and slice away its ability to pursue an independent foreign policy.

- **Venezuela.**
- **Russia** (under increasing pressure despite the 2022-2024 surge in imports). The U.S. has now extended threats toward the **BRICS** grouping, challenging India's multilateral engagements.

3. Credibility with Partners

India's "start-stop" engagement damages its reputation as a reliable infrastructure partner. If New Delhi exits Chabahar now, regional powers in Central Asia and the Middle East may view India's foreign policy as being "subservient" to Washington's interests.

Analysis for UPSC

A. Concept of Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy is the ability of a state to pursue its national interests and adopt its preferred foreign policy without being constrained by other states. The Chabahar crisis suggests that while India claims to be a "leading power," its economic and technological dependencies on the U.S. create a "**glass ceiling**" on its independent decision-making.

B. The West Asia Complication

The ongoing conflict in West Asia has made the U.S. less willing to grant concessions to Iran. For India, this means its regional connectivity projects are now "collateral damage" in a larger ideological and military struggle between the U.S. and the "Axis of Resistance."

C. Economic vs. Strategic Trade-off

- **Risk:** Sanctions could cripple India's banking sector and access to U.S. technology.
- **Cost:** Losing Chabahar means losing 20 years of diplomacy and a strategic counter to Pakistan's **Gwadar Port** (funded by China).

Conclusion

The lapse of the Chabahar waiver is more than a technicality; it is a test of India's "**Strategic Autonomy 2.0.**" If India yields, it risks becoming a junior partner in a U.S.-led regional architecture. If it persists, it faces economic isolation from the world's largest economy. The path New Delhi chooses will define its standing in the multipolar world for the next decade.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques:The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is related to:

- (a) Climate change mitigation
- (b) Iran's nuclear program
- (c) Maritime security in the Indo-Pacific
- (d) Global trade liberalization

Ans : b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques:Analyze the geopolitical significance of Chabahar Port for India's connectivity with Central Asia and Afghanistan. (150 words)



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The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) 2025 has disrupted the decades-long trend of a constantly expanding Indian electorate. By shifting from a "Summary Revision" (annual corrections) to an "Intensive Revision" (re-drafting the roll), the Election Commission has "cured the roll of its obesity," leading to record-high turnout percentages—not necessarily because more people voted, but because the denominator (the electorate) was purged of "ghost" entries.

SIR pause on way to a billion electorate

The SIR has trimmed India's electoral roll by removing absent, shifted, dead, and duplicate names, leading to record turnout percentages across States despite shrunken electorates; while the exercise strengthens the accuracy of the roll, the challenge now is to ensure it remains inclusive and free of disenfranchisement

FULL CONTEXT

Akshay Raut

Tamil Nadu finished its single-day poll on April 23 with a record turnout of over 85%, surpassing the earlier best of 78.28% in 2011 and a huge 12% higher than the 73.63% turnout in the last Assembly election. The base for the turnout was a trimmed-down electorate of 5.67 crore. While factoring in the high-octane political contest and mobilisation, the turnout rate would arguably be lower if the State electoral roll had retained "ghost electors" – the dead, shifted, absent, and duplicate names – that existed as of October 2025, when the special intensive revision (SIR) kicked in. Similar trend is seen in West Bengal, with a turnout of 92.88% in the phase. Assam, Puducherry, and Kerala also delivered record turnouts earlier this month, all following the pattern of shrunken electorates. Therein lies a story.

Before the turn

In the run-up to its 75th Foundation Day on January 25 last year, also called the National Voters' Day, the Election Commission (EC) announced a grand celebration 'in light of the fact that India's total electorate is approaching the 100-crore mark.' That was a well-made observation by available arithmetic. The electoral database then stood at 99.1 crore, including 21.7 crore young voters aged 18-29. The steadily rising electoral gender ratio had further jumped from 948 in 2024 to 954. With an estimated population of 1.4 billion, India went into the last Lok Sabha elections with 96.88 crore registered voters. International observers have long watched in awe the elephantine Indian electorate, with the United States a distant second and countries such as Brazil and Indonesia trailing far behind. As usual, it completed its second phase earlier this month, India's grand list of electors appears poised to be significantly reversing its advance, though it may still be celebrated for other reasons.

India's electorate has been growing constantly, keeping pace with population growth. The logic is simple: all citizens above the age of 18, unless otherwise disqualified, are to be included in the electoral roll of their respective constituencies, where they are ordinarily resident. Broadly estimated at 78% of the population, a billion voters would look natural in the case of a wholesome registration. Interestingly, the electorate has often grown faster; during the 1985-2021 period, the population grew fourfold, from 36 crore to 138 crore, while the electorate grew more than fivefold, from 17 crore to 91 crore.

Starting with 17.32 crore electors in 1951, India's electoral roll has swelled steadily year after year, except for minor aberrations after accounting for births and deaths by lakhs of ground-level staff. Each January, the country releases updated and revised electoral rolls based on a summary revision with reference to last January.

The SIR twist

But then came SIR 2025. The revision, which has already covered 13 States and Union Territories, including Bihar in the first phase, has disrupted the usual elector count based on the logic of growing population. In the 12 States and Union Territories where SIR was ordered on October 27 last year – spanning 321



A voter checks his name on the electoral roll after the Election Commission published West Bengal's post-SIR voter list in Kolkata on February 28, 2025.

The SIR is not the answer to the alleged adulteration of demography by non-citizens or infiltrators, nor is the EC in charge of policing this part. But, SIR has cured the electoral roll of its obesity, giving it a new look

districts and 1,843 Assembly constituencies – the number of electors has dropped to less than 46 crore from a base of 91 crore. All major States, such as Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Gujarat, and Chhattisgarh, have each reported a reduction of more than 10%. Much of the downsizing is due to the removal of ASDD names (absent, shifted, dead, or doubly enrolled), purification being a basic purpose of any electoral revision. States such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have a history of job-related migration, warranting the removal of names. The ASDD burden has also accumulated because the last SIR was conducted between 2002 and 2004.

In substantial consideration, SIR entails drafting a new roll, compared to annual revisions, which are corrections on the existing list. But notably, there are a sizable number of deletions on account of non-return of enumeration forms, non-traceability of persons, objections resolved through the designated Form 7, and, importantly, for failing the eligibility criteria stipulated for electors under the Constitution, determined through verification of documents.

With the burden of proof shifting to the citizen, for a sizeable section of the population, the SIR has been like re-earning the franchise.

Additions factored
During the SIR process, the trimming is most visible at the draft roll stage and is largely driven by ASDD factors. There is,

however, some recovery on the way to the final roll, thanks to fresh enrolments. In Uttar Pradesh, the initial roll of 15.44 crore slumped to a draft of 12.55 crore, before rising to a final tally of 13.29 crore following substantial additions. Tamil Nadu started with a list of 6.41 crore, which fell to 5.44 crore in the draft roll, but the net final roll was of 5.67 crore electors. In June last year, Bihar started the intensive revision with a base of 7.89 crore electors and ended up with a final roll of 7.42 crore, improving upon the published draft of 7.24 crore. West Bengal, however, has been a different case, with issues of logical discrepancies affecting the final roll and spilling over into politics and the streets.

Reverse journey

Close to 60 crore of India's electors have already gone through the SIR exercise. The aggregate number has declined by nearly six crores even after additions. The remaining 40 crore electors, spread across 23 States and U.T.s, are now preparing for the scrutiny. With standard extrapolation, by the time SIR is completed across the country, the size of India's electorate could fall to around 90 crore.

The stated goal of SIR is to ensure that all eligible citizens, including newly eligible youth and temporary migrants, are included in the electoral roll. The details of the post-SIR final rolls, especially the addition of new electors, bear testimony to this effort. But the activity missed the profile, drowned in the overwhelming narrative of deletion.

In recent years, inclusivity has been a key focus in electoral roll management, addressing gender disparities, improving youth cohorts, and ensuring that persons with disabilities, the third gender community, and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) are fully enrolled in

a campaign mode.

Crux of democracy

India has prided itself on both the scale and quality of its elections over the last 75 years. The starting manifestation of both these is in the country's electoral roll. The litmus test for a credible election begins with the accuracy and completeness of the electoral roll and culminates in the general acceptance of the electoral outcome. Despite the scepticism from Western powers at the dawn of India's independence, the country has stood firm in sustaining an electoral democracy through credible and respectful exercise of the franchise. This is an outstanding fact, irrespective of the recent disputes over the electoral process and management. All interventions, including SIR, have to strengthen the cause.

Renew focus on inclusion

The SIR is not the answer to the alleged adulteration of demography by non-citizens or infiltrators, nor is the EC in charge of policing this part. However, the SIR has cured the electoral roll of its obesity, giving it a new look. The quantitative expansion of India's electoral roll has received a discernible pause.

It is now for election managers to ensure and provide all stakeholders with the confidence that the new slim roll is accurate and free of disenfranchisement. Concerns that the SIR process, in its uncompromising pursuit, should not strip people and groups of their democratic rights on technical grounds must not be seen as hostile.

After the high-profile focus on removing ineligible names, the EC should now invest its energy in reaffirming its celebrated resolve that no eligible voter is left behind. (Akshay Raut is former Director General, Election Commission of India. Views expressed are personal)

THE GIST

India's electorate, which had steadily expanded faster than population growth, is now poised for a reverse trajectory, with numbers potentially falling towards 90 crore as the exercise progresses across the remaining States and U.T.s.

The revision process, involving draft rolls, verification of documents, objections through Form 7, and non-return of enumeration forms, has in many cases shifted the burden of proof to citizens, making it akin to re-earning the franchise for sections of the population.

Despite the dominant narrative of deletions, final rolls show recovery through fresh enrolments, reflecting efforts to include newly eligible youth, migrants, and underrepresented groups, even as discrepancies in some States continue to spill into politics and public debate.

Key Concept: Summary vs. Intensive Revision

Feature	Summary Revision (Annual)	Intensive Revision (SIR)
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Daily News Analysis

Feature	Summary Revision (Annual)	Intensive Revision (SIR)
Frequency	Conducted every year (usually Jan 1st).	Conducted after long intervals (last was 2002-04).
Method	Corrections, additions, and deletions on the existing list.	House-to-house enumeration to draft a new roll from scratch.
Result	Generally reflects population growth.	Often results in a "shrunken" but more accurate list.

Impact of SIR 2025: The "Shrunken" Electorate

The SIR has covered 13 States/UTs so far, with significant results:

- **The Aggregate Decline:** Across the first 60 crore electors scrutinized, the list declined by nearly **6 crore** names after removing ASDD entries.
- **The "Ghost" Factor:** Names of **Absent, Shifted, Dead, and Duplicate (ASDD)** voters were purged. This is crucial in states with high migration like UP and Bihar.
- **Statistical Surge in Turnout:**
 - **Tamil Nadu:** Recorded **85%** turnout (up from 73.6% in the previous Assembly poll).
 - **West Bengal:** Phase 1 saw a massive **92.88%** turnout.
 - **Analysis:** These record percentages are a direct result of a "trimmed" base electorate of genuine, resident voters.

The UPSC Perspective: Challenges & Governance

1. Accuracy vs. Inclusivity (The Dilemma)

While a "lean" roll is accurate, the SIR process shifts the **burden of proof to the citizen**.

- **Risk of Disenfranchisement:** There is a concern that eligible voters (especially those without tech access or documentation) might be deleted on technical grounds, such as "non-return of enumeration forms."
- **Vulnerable Groups:** Ensuring that PVTGs, the third gender, and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) are not left behind during the "trimming" process is a major governance challenge.

2. Federal & Political Tensions

The SIR results in West Bengal led to political disputes over "logical discrepancies." When a list shrinks by 10%, it can lead to allegations of targeted deletions. Transparency in the SIR process is essential to maintain the **"Neutrality" of the Election Commission**.

3. The "Billion Electorate" Milestone

India was poised to reach 100 crore (1 billion) voters by 2026. The SIR has placed a "pause" on this journey. Projections now suggest the total electorate might fall to **90 crore** once SIR is completed nationwide.

Way Forward: "No Voter Left Behind"

The author argues that after the high-profile focus on deletions to clean the roll, the EC must now pivot back to its core mantra: **Inclusion**.

- **Re-earning the Franchise:** The EC must ensure that the "burden of proof" does not become a barrier for the marginalized.
- **Continuous Rectification:** The recovery from "Draft Roll" to "Final Roll" shows that active administrative effort can bring back mistakenly deleted voters.

Conclusion

The SIR 2025 is a "purification" exercise that strengthens the credibility of Indian democracy. However, the success of the exercise should not just be measured by how many "ghosts" were removed, but by how many "living and eligible" citizens were successfully retained. A credible election starts with an accurate roll, but a truly democratic one requires a complete one.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "An accurate electoral roll is the foundation of a credible democracy, but inclusivity is its soul." Discuss in the context of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. **(250 Words)**

Summer as a source of income shock for gig workers

As India moves into another summer, early forecasts indicate intense heat ahead. Heatwaves are no longer rare; they are a recurring feature of Indian summers. The question is no longer whether extreme heat will return, but whether the country is prepared for its economic consequences.

Official data show that India did experience significant heat-related mortality in 2022. Meteorological trends indicate that heatwaves across large parts of the country have become more frequent and prolonged over the past decade. As policymakers review preparedness measures before peak summer arrives, there is one group which remains largely absent from the adaptation conversation – gig and delivery workers, whose livelihoods increasingly power India's urban economy.

From food delivery riders and e-commerce couriers to app-based drivers and logistics workers, millions now earn income through digital platforms. NITI Aayog estimates India had about 7.7 million gig workers in 2020-21, projected to reach over 23 million by 2029-30. As heatwaves intensify, this growing workforce will be among the most climate-exposed and least protected.

Heat cuts earnings

For gig and delivery workers, extreme heat is not just a matter of discomfort; it directly affects earnings. Income depends on the number of trips completed, orders delivered, or hours logged on an app. When temperatures surge, movement slows, fatigue increases, and health risks rise; yet, incentive structures remain unchanged.

Unlike salaried employees, gig workers cannot "work from home" or take paid leave during extreme heat. Logging off for a few hours means immediate income loss. Continuing to work through peak heat hours increases the risk of dehydration, heat exhaustion, and longer-term health stress. If the coming summer follows recent patterns, heat will be not just a public health concern but an income shock, forcing



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Resilience for
gig workers
means safe
work and stable
earnings during
extreme heat

workers to choose between protecting their health and their earnings.

Preparedness remains incomplete

India has made progress in recognising heat as a public health risk. Heat Action Plans, early warning systems and emergency measures have improved preparedness in several cities. But most policies still treat heat as a medical emergency rather than an economic risk, assuming that people can adjust their behaviour. Advisories typically recommend staying indoors, reducing physical activity, and taking frequent breaks. But for gig and delivery workers, whose income depends on mobility, these options are not realistic.

Even where cities set up temporary drinking water kiosks, shaded rest areas, or cooling centres, these measures are rarely designed with highly mobile platform workers in mind. As a result, preparedness efforts may reduce mortality, but they do little to prevent income loss.

The weeks before peak summer offer a narrow but important policy window. Heat stress sits at the intersection of climate policy, labour regulation, urban planning and platform governance. Yet, responsibility remains fragmented.

Health departments focus on illness and mortality. Disaster management agencies focus on emergency response. Labour departments grapple with the ambiguous employment status of gig workers. Digital platforms optimise delivery times and incentives, with limited explicit integration of climate risk considerations. When accountability is distributed across institutions without coordination, heat risk for gig workers remains inadequately addressed. These vulnerabilities are further compounded for women gig workers, who often face additional health, safety and unpaid care burdens during extreme heat, making income disruption even harder to absorb.

If adaptation is to move beyond reactive

measures, this is the moment to expand its scope.

First, heat must be treated as a labour and productivity issue, not only a health one. Rest norms during peak heat hours, shaded congregation points, and access to drinking water at common waiting locations should be seen as basic safeguards.

Second, policymakers must acknowledge that extreme heat creates income volatility. Without mechanisms – whether through labour protections or better integration with existing welfare systems – to cushion these losses, adaptation will remain incomplete.

Third, digital labour platforms need to be part of the preparedness conversation.

Heat-responsive design such as moderating delivery pressure during peak heat hours or introducing more flexible performance metrics – can lower exposure without halting services.

Finally, stronger institutional coordination is needed before summer intensifies. Collaboration among labour departments, urban local bodies, disaster management authorities, and platform regulators would signal that heat risk is being treated as an economic issue, not just a seasonal emergency.

Rethinking resilience

India's cities increasingly depend on gig and delivery workers to function. Food, medicines and essential goods move through urban systems because this workforce absorbs daily risks. As temperatures rise, those risks will intensify.

Climate resilience cannot be measured only by advisories issued or cooling centres opened. For gig workers navigating city streets on two-wheelers and bicycles, resilience means the ability to work safely – and to earn without enduring silent income losses during extreme heat.

If heat preparedness continues to overlook gig and delivery workers, the country will enter another season of rising temperatures without protecting one of its most visible and essential workforces.

GS Paper II : Governance & Social Justice

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question: "Heatwaves in India are no longer just a public health concern but an emerging 'income shock', especially for gig workers." Discuss the structural vulnerabilities of gig workers in this context and suggest policy measures for building economic resilience. (150 Words)

Context :As India enters a summer predicted to have intense heatwaves, the focus is shifting from heat as a mere health hazard to heat as an "Income Shock." While NITI Aayog projects India's gig workforce to reach 23 million by 2029-30, this population remains largely invisible in India's formal Heat Action Plans (HAPs), forcing them to choose between their health and their daily earnings.

The Gig Worker's Dilemma: Health vs. Income

Unlike salaried employees, gig and delivery workers face unique structural challenges during extreme heat:

- **Piece-Rate Wage Structure:** Income is tied to the number of deliveries/trips. Slowing down due to heat-induced fatigue results in immediate financial loss.
- **Lack of Social Safety Nets:** Gig workers lack paid leave or "work from home" options. Logging off during peak heat hours (12 PM – 4 PM) means zero income.
- **The "Climate-Exposure" Gap:** While official advisories urge citizens to "stay indoors," the gig economy depends on these workers being outdoors on bicycles and two-wheelers during peak demand hours.

Shortcomings in Current Preparedness

The author points out that India's current approach to heat is fragmented and incomplete:

1. **Medical vs. Economic Risk:** Most policies treat heat as a medical emergency (reducing mortality) rather than an economic risk (preventing income loss).
2. **Fragmented Accountability:** Responsibility is split across health departments (illness), disaster management (response), and labor departments (who struggle with the "employee" status of gig workers).
3. **Gendered Vulnerability:** Women gig workers face a "double burden"—health risks on the road and increased unpaid care/safety burdens at home during extreme heat.

Proposed Policy Framework for Resilience

To move beyond reactive measures, the article suggests a four-pronged approach:

1. Treating Heat as a Labor Issue

- **Workplace Standards:** Establishing rest norms during peak hours and creating shaded "waiting points" near delivery hubs.
- **Basic Safeguards:** Mandatory access to drinking water and cooling zones at common congregation points.

2. Addressing Income Volatility

- **Welfare Integration:** Using existing welfare systems or labor protections to "cushion" the income loss gig workers suffer when they are forced to stop working due to extreme heat.

3. Platform Governance & Design

- **Heat-Responsive Metrics:** Platforms should moderate delivery pressure (e.g., extending delivery time windows) during heatwave alerts.
- **Performance Flexibility:** Removing penalties for slow movement or lower login hours during peak temperatures.

4. Institutional Coordination

- **Inter-Departmental Collaboration:** Syncing Labor Departments, Urban Local Bodies, and Disaster Management authorities to treat heat as a systemic economic threat.

UPSC Perspective: Connecting the Dots

- **Urban Planning (GS-I):** The need for "Blue-Green Infrastructure" (parks, water bodies, shaded corridors) to protect highly mobile urban workforces.
- **Gig Economy (GS-III):** The **Code on Social Security (2020)** mentions gig workers, but its implementation regarding climate-induced occupational hazards remains a grey area.
- **Disaster Management (GS-III):** Shifting from "Relief-Centric" to "Resilience-Centric" approaches, as recommended by the **Sendai Framework**.

Conclusion

Climate resilience in India cannot be measured solely by the number of cooling centers opened. True resilience for the 7.7 million (and growing) gig workers means the **ability to work safely without enduring "silent income losses."** As the urban economy increasingly runs on their wheels, protecting them from the "summer shock" is not just a matter of social justice, but of economic stability.

