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Vande Mataram and the right to dissent

The 2026 amendment protects *Vande Mataram* from being stopped or disrupted, but does not make singing it compulsory or prescribe all six stanzas; the Supreme Court's *Bijoe Emmanuel* judgment protects an individual's right to remain silent when participation conflicts with freedom of conscience

LETTER & SPIRIT

Haris Beeran

Parliament has given *Vande Mataram* the same criminal-law protection long enjoyed by the national anthem. But a closer look at the Constituent Assembly's own reasoning, the actual text of the new law, and the Supreme Court's judgment in *Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala* (1986) suggests that the position is far less settled and far more protective of individual conscience than the political rhetoric around the amendment implies.

Why it was not the anthem

The question of India's national anthem was left open for nearly the entire life of the Constituent Assembly. It was finally settled not by a vote, but by a presidential statement on January 24, 1950, at the Assembly's last sitting, when Dr. Rajendra Prasad declared that *Jana Gana Mana* would be the National Anthem of India, and that *Vande Mataram*, "which has played a historic part in the struggle for Indian freedom, shall be honoured equally with *Jana Gana Mana* and shall have equal status with it."

That formula is worth reading carefully, because what it conspicuously does not do is make *Vande Mataram* the anthem or even a co-anthem. The Constitution, when it came into force two days later, contains no reference whatsoever to a "national song". The status of *Vande Mataram* rests entirely on Dr. Prasad's 1950 statement and on subsequent convention, and nothing more.

The reason for this restraint lies earlier, in the Indian National Congress's own reckoning with the song in the 1930s. *Vande Mataram's* later stanzas, rarely sung today, invoke the motherland in explicitly devotional, goddess-centred terms. In the context of the 1882 novel *Anandamath*, from which the song is drawn, some of its verses were also read as casting Muslims as adversaries. Objections from the Muslim League and others led the Congress Working Committee, in October 1937, to resolve that only the first two stanzas – pastoral, secular in imagery and free of any reference to a deity – would be sung at official gatherings.

That 1937 compromise is what Dr. Prasad's Constituent Assembly statement inherited and preserved in 1950: full-throated reverence for the song's role in the freedom struggle, but a deliberate decision to keep its more contentious, devotional verses out of India's civic and constitutional life. It was not an oversight.

What the amendment says

The Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Bill, 2026, was introduced in the Rajya Sabha on July 24, 2026, and cleared both Houses within a week. The Rajya Sabha cleared it on July 29 and the Lok Sabha on July 30, each after only a brief discussion, with the Opposition, including the DMK and Congress, raising strong objections about the Bill being used to advance a particular cultural agenda and about the timing amid unrelated protests in the House. It received Presidential assent shortly after.

Given the speed and thinness of the debate, the Amendment – one of 12 Bills passed in a Monsoon Session in which, by Parliament's own record, most legislation went through with barely any discussion – has had remarkably little parliamentary scrutiny for a law that touches on religious sentiment, free expression and



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criminal liability all at once.

What the Amendment actually does is narrower than the headlines suggest. It substitutes Section 3 of the 1971 Act with a provision that punishes two things, and only two things, in relation to both the national anthem and the national song: intentionally preventing their singing and causing disturbance to an assembly engaged in singing them. The punishment – up to three years' imprisonment, a fine, or both, with a mandatory minimum of one year for repeat offenders – is now common to both compositions.

Here is the question mark worth putting squarely to the government: nowhere does the amended Act say which stanzas of *Vande Mataram* must be sung, or that all six stanzas must be sung, for the law's protection to apply. The statute does not prescribe a mandatory version of the song at all. It does not compel singing in the first place by anyone, of any stanza.

All the amended Section 3 requires is that if the national song is being sung, at whatever length and in whatever form, that rendition must not be intentionally prevented or disturbed. That is a materially narrower obligation than the political framing around the Bill – including the government's own push, since late 2025, to popularise and even mandate all six stanzas at official functions – might lead the public to believe. The law penalises disrespect and disruption of a performance; it does not, on its text, mandate participation in one, nor does it fix which version of the song is entitled to protection.

The later stanzas

The commonly sung opening stanzas of *Vande Mataram* describe the motherland in pastoral terms, her waters, her fruit, her cooling breezes, her fields. It is the later stanzas, historically dropped from public renditions by the Congress in 1937 but increasingly promoted for full recitation since the government's commemoration of the song's 150th anniversary in late 2025, that shift register entirely.

In substance, and in every available English rendering, they describe the motherland as embodied in the Hindu goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, respectively, goddesses of power, wealth and learning, and speak of her as an object of worship enshrined in temples, with "crores" of arms raised in her

defence. This is not patriotic verse loosely coloured with cultural reference; on a plain reading, it is a devotional address to a deity, structured in the grammar of prayer.

Freedom of conscience

India is constitutionally committed to a plurality of faiths: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and others, each entitled under Article 25 to freedom of conscience and the free profession, practice and propagation of religion, and under Article 26 to manage its own religious affairs without State interference.

For adherents of monotheistic faiths in particular, being required, whether by direct compulsion or by the coercive pressure of a criminal statute looming over any public assembly, to stand through or refrain from disrupting an extended recitation addressed to Hindu goddesses raises a genuine and serious constitutional difficulty. A citizen's discomfort with participating in what is, on the text, an act of worship of deities outside their own faith is not eccentric; it is exactly the kind of conscientious objection that Articles 25 and 26 exist to protect.

Articles 25 and 26 are fundamental rights. It is a basic proposition of Indian constitutional law that no ordinary legislation, however patriotically framed or however overwhelming its parliamentary majority, can override a fundamental right. A law that has the effect of pressuring citizens, on pain of criminal liability for anyone thought to be "disturbing" its recitation, to acquiesce in a devotional performance contrary to their faith would not survive that Part III scrutiny. The 2026 Amendment does not, fortunately, go that far on its text, but the danger, as the next section shows, lies in how it may be applied.

The Bijoe Emmanuel ruling

This is not an abstract or first-time question for Indian courts. It was addressed directly and decisively in *Bijoe Emmanuel & Ors. v. State of Kerala* (1986), a case that remains the single most important precedent on the collision between compelled patriotic ritual and freedom of conscience.

Three siblings, Bijoe, Binu Mol and Bindu Emmanuel, practising Jehovah's Witnesses, stood respectfully and silently while their schoolmates sang *Jana Gana*

Mana during morning assembly. They did not sing themselves because their faith forbade what they understood as an act of worship of anyone or anything other than god. For this, they were expelled.

The Kerala High Court upheld the expulsion, holding that Article 51A's fundamental duty to respect the national anthem overrode any claim under Articles 25 and 26, and that Jehovah's Witnesses could not even invoke those protections.

The Supreme Court, in a judgment authored by Justice O. Chinnappa Reddy, reversed the High Court in emphatic terms. The Bench held that compelling a person to join in singing despite a genuine, conscientiously held religious objection contravenes both Article 19(1)(a) – freedom of expression, which the court held extends to the freedom to remain silent – and Article 25(1), the guarantee of freedom of conscience.

Crucially, the court held that the fundamental duties enumerated under Article 51A cannot be used to cut down or override the fundamental rights guaranteed under Part III of the Constitution; a duty to respect national symbols cannot, in law, be turned into a licence to punish sincere religious dissent. The court also read the 1971 Act itself as requiring nothing more than respectful conduct, not active participation from anyone present. It closed with the observation that the country's tradition, philosophy and Constitution alike "practise tolerance," urging that this not be diluted.

That ruling has never been overturned, and its logic transfers with full force to *Vande Mataram*, arguably with greater force, given that the song's later verses are, unlike the anthem, addressed to specific deities. If the Supreme Court held that a Jehovah's Witness could not be compelled to sing a secular anthem against conscience, the same protection must extend, a fortiori, to a citizen who objects to reciting verses that are, on their face, prayers to Hindu goddesses.

Legal position

Put together, the three strands here point to a single, clear conclusion.

First, the Constituent Assembly and the country's founding leadership deliberately confined official recognition to the first two, secular stanzas of *Vande Mataram*. That is precisely why the fuller, devotional version was never made compulsory, then or since.

Second, the 2026 Amendment, whatever its political framing, imposes no textual obligation on any citizen to sing any particular version of the song, let alone all six stanzas. It penalises only the prevention or disturbance of a singing that is already taking place.

Third, and most importantly, even where the song, including its later stanzas, is sung, a citizen who chooses not to join in because doing so would offend their freedom of conscience under Article 25 is under no legal obligation to participate.

The law as laid down by the Supreme Court in *Bijoe Emmanuel* gives that citizen complete protection: standing respectfully, in silence, without disrupting others, is not an offence under this Act, was not an offence under the original 1971 Act, and cannot be made one merely by extending the statute to a new composition.

Citizens uneasy about the fuller version of *Vande Mataram* do not need to wait for a court to vindicate them after the fact. The law, correctly read, already protects them.

(Haris Beeran is a Rajya Sabha MP and a lawyer)

THE GIST

▼ *Vande Mataram* was given equal status with *Jana Gana Mana* in 1950 for its historic role in the freedom struggle, but was never made the national anthem or a co-anthem.

▼ The 1937 Congress compromise limited official renditions to the first two stanzas, keeping the later devotional verses invoking Hindu goddesses out of civic and official life.

▼ The 2026 amendment has renewed debate over the song's later stanzas and the constitutional questions surrounding religious freedom, freedom of conscience and the State's role in patriotic expression.

1. Vande Mataram and the Right to Dissent

Source: The Hindu | **GS:** GS-II — Indian Constitution, Fundamental Rights, National Symbols

Context: The **Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Act, 2026** has extended statutory protection to **Vande Mataram**, bringing the National Song under the same Section 3 protection that already applied to the National Anthem. The amendment makes it an offence to **intentionally prevent the singing of Vande Mataram or cause disturbance to an assembly engaged in its singing.**

The controversy also concerns the **full six-stanza version** of Vande Mataram and the constitutional boundary between **protecting national honour and compelling individual participation.**

Mains Perspective

I. Historical Background

- 1. Composition:** *Vande Mataram* was composed by **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Chattopadhyay)** and first published on **7 November 1875** in *Bangadarshan*. It was later incorporated into his novel *Anandamath* (1882).
- 2. Freedom Movement:** It became an important symbol of the national movement and acquired particular significance during the **Swadeshi Movement of 1905**.
- 3. First Public Singing:** **Rabindranath Tagore** first sang it at the **1896 Indian National Congress session in Calcutta**.
- 4. National Song:** On **24 January 1950**, Dr Rajendra Prasad stated that Vande Mataram, because of its historic role in the freedom struggle, would receive **equal honour with Jana Gana Mana**. Thus, *Jana Gana Mana* became the National Anthem and *Vande Mataram* the National Song.
- 5. Two-Stanza Practice:** In **1937**, the Congress adopted the practice of using the **first two stanzas** for public/official occasions amid concerns over religious references in the later stanzas.

II. What Has Changed Recently?

1. 1971 Act: The **Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971** provided statutory protection against specified forms of insult to national symbols and, under Section 3, dealt with prevention or disturbance of the **National Anthem**.

2. 2026 Amendment: The **Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Act, 2026** amended Section 3 to cover **both Jana Gana Mana and Vande Mataram**. Intentionally preventing their singing or causing disturbance to an assembly engaged in their singing is now covered by the provision.

3. Six-Stanza Issue: The government has also moved towards using the **complete six-stanza version** in specified official functions. This has revived the historical debate over the 1937 two-stanza practice.

4. Important Distinction: **Legal protection from disruption is not the same as compelling every citizen to sing.** The central constitutional question is therefore whether regulation of a national symbol crosses into compelled expression.

III. **Constitutional Significance**

1. Right to Dissent — Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of speech and expression provides the principal constitutional basis for the **right to dissent**, subject to reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2).

2. Freedom of Conscience — Article 25: Article 25 protects **freedom of conscience**, allowing individuals to act according to sincerely held beliefs, subject to constitutional limitations.

3. *Bijoe Emmanuel* Judgment, 1986: The Supreme Court protected students who **respectfully stood during the National Anthem but did not sing it** because of their beliefs. The key principle is that **respectful non-participation is not automatically disrespect**.

4. Fundamental Duty — Article 51A(a): Citizens have a fundamental duty to **abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals and institutions, the National Flag and the National Anthem**. This reinforces respect for national symbols but must be understood alongside fundamental rights.

IV. **Core Constitutional Issue**

1. Protection vs Compulsion: The State has a legitimate interest in preventing **deliberate disruption or insult**, but protection of a national symbol does not automatically mean compulsory individual participation.

2. Patriotism and Pluralism: Constitutional patriotism should allow **diversity of belief and respectful dissent** rather than equating patriotism with a single prescribed form of expression.

3. Reasonable Restrictions: Any restriction on expression must satisfy the constitutional test of **Article 19(2)** and cannot be justified merely by invoking nationalism.

V. **Way Forward**

1. **Protect, Not Coerce:** Prevent deliberate disruption of national symbols while respecting genuine freedom of conscience.
2. **Follow Constitutional Precedent:** Apply the principle of ***Bijoe Emmanuel*** where genuine conscience-based non-participation is involved.
3. **Build Constitutional Patriotism:** Encourage respect for national symbols through **civic education and constitutional values**, rather than excessive coercion.

Eyes on the seas

UKMTO

What was established to help combat piracy has now emerged as a primary source of information for vessels on the dangers lurking at sea

Debayan Tewari

In August 18, 2026, an unknown projectile hit the Liberia-flagged bulk carrier *Minoan Dignity* while it was exiting the Strait of Hormuz, killing the ship's chief engineer.

Before the news broke, a 72-word alert had informed seafarers and maritime observers about the attack. It read, "UKMTO has received a report of an incident in the Strait of Hormuz. The Company Security Officer has reported that the vessel was struck by an unknown projectile while conducting an outbound transit of the Strait of Hormuz. The impact caused damage to the engine room and resulted in a crew casualty. The remaining crew are currently being assisted by the Omani Coast Guard. At present, no environmental impact has been reported."

For 25 years now, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) has been providing seafarers, shipping companies and authorities "essential, verified and corroborated security information". According to its website, it is a "trusted authority in the maritime security sector, helping protect crucial trade routes". Always working in the background, the West Asia war and Iran's stranglehold over the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian



Gulf, and the threat posed by the Houthis at the Bab el-Mandeb in southern Red Sea, have put this under-the-radar organisation in the spotlight.

Maritime security

The UKMTO is a British Royal Navy-sponsored organisation that was formed in 2001 with an office in Dubai to handle distress calls during piracy threats, particularly near Somalia. In 2014, it was moved to Portsmouth in the U.K. The 'UK National Strategy for Maritime Security', presented in the British Parliament in 2014, outlines the U.K.'s broad-based thinking on maritime strategy of which the UKMTO is a part. The document said how "every aspect of our national life" is connected to the wider world and "most of these connections are provided by the sea". Hence, it was seen as an imperative to "organise and use our current national capabilities to identify, assess and address maritime security issues at home and overseas".

For its scale of operations, the UKMTO is a lean organisation with a team of 15 civilian 'watch-keepers' and three managers. The team, which works in shifts, takes calls from ship masters irrespective of their nationalities and coordinates rescue responses and issues warnings and advisories.

The UKMTO works in West Asia and the Indian Ocean Region through an information framework agreement and operates a "Voluntary Reporting Scheme within the Voluntary Reporting Area (VRA)" outlined in a maritime security chart, according to its website. This zone stretches to almost 2.5 million sq. miles of the ocean and includes the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, a majority of the northwestern Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, and Persian Gulf.

The UKMTO has three 24/7 phone lines and an email to report emergencies or incidents. Ship masters are requested to file multiple reports – an initial report when entering the

VRA, a daily report while transiting the area, and a final report after exiting the VRA or reaching a port. Following an incident, the UKMTO says that a "detailed After Action Report" is submitted.

In June, while reporting on a U.S. attack on a ship in which three Indians were killed off Oman, *The Hindu* had called one of the numbers and sent an email. While the response was prompt, the staff refused to divulge any information about the attack.

Though initially set up to fight piracy and serve British interests, the UKMTO assumed greater significance in November 2023 when Houthis started attacking commercial ships it claimed were linked to Israel or its allies in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Between October and December 2023, after the Hamas attack on Israel and the beginning of the Israeli offensive, the UKMTO "put out 71 warnings and advisories, took part in 40 exercises and drills, handled 27 emergency events," according to the BBC.

Today, the UKMTO has positioned itself as the primary point of contact for commercial vessels with military forces in the region. The reporting system aims to, in the UKMTO's words, "increase security and provide anti-piracy support to maintain the freedom of navigation to all vessels".

2. UKMTO: Strengthening Maritime Security and Freedom of Navigation

Source: The Hindu | **GS:** GS-II — International Relations | GS-III — Maritime Security

Context: The **United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO)**, established to combat piracy, has evolved into an important **maritime-security information and coordination mechanism** for commercial vessels. Its significance has increased amid threats to shipping in the **Strait of Hormuz, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and wider Indian Ocean**.

Mains Perspective

I. Evolution and Role of UKMTO

- 1. From Anti-Piracy to Wider Maritime Security:** Established in **2001**, UKMTO initially focused on piracy, particularly around Somalia. It has now become a trusted source of **verified maritime-security information**.
- 2. Early Warning Mechanism:** Ships can voluntarily report their movements and incidents, enabling UKMTO to issue **warnings and advisories** about emerging threats.
- 3. Emergency Coordination:** Its **24/7 reporting system** allows vessels to communicate during emergencies and helps coordinate appropriate responses.
- 4. Freedom of Navigation:** By improving information flow between commercial vessels and security authorities, UKMTO helps ships navigate dangerous waters and supports the continuity of maritime trade.

II. Why It Matters for India

- 1. Strategic Sea Lanes:** The UKMTO reporting area includes the **Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden**, all important for India's maritime and economic interests.
- 2. Energy Security:** Any disruption around the **Strait of Hormuz**, a major energy-shipping chokepoint, can affect India's energy supplies and shipping costs.
- 3. Indian Seafarers:** Timely maritime warnings are important for protecting Indian crews working on commercial vessels operating in high-risk waters.

4. Maritime Domain Awareness: UKMTO highlights the importance of **real-time information-sharing and surveillance** alongside conventional naval capabilities.

III. **Emerging Maritime Security Challenges**

1. Geopolitical Conflicts: Maritime threats are increasingly linked to regional conflicts rather than piracy alone, as demonstrated by attacks on commercial vessels around West Asia.

2. Non-State Actors: Houthi attacks have shown how non-state actors can disrupt major international shipping routes, particularly around the **Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb**.

3. Vulnerable Chokepoints: Disruption at **Hormuz or Bab-el-Mandeb** can affect global trade and energy flows well beyond the immediate region.

IV. **India's Way Forward**

1. Strengthen Maritime Domain Awareness: Improve India's capacity to monitor shipping movements and identify emerging threats across the **Indian Ocean Region**.

2. Enhance Information-Sharing: Deepen cooperation with international maritime-security mechanisms such as UKMTO.

3. Protect Sea Lines of Communication: Maintain adequate surveillance and naval preparedness around critical maritime routes and chokepoints.

4. Protect Seafarers: Strengthen emergency communication, evacuation and assistance mechanisms for Indian crews in conflict-prone waters.

Prelims Connect — Key Facts

1. UKMTO: United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, established in **2001** as a Royal Navy-supported organisation.

2. Headquarters: Operations were moved to **Portsmouth, UK, in 2014**.

3. Voluntary Reporting Area (VRA): Covers approximately **2.5 million sq miles** and includes the **Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf and north-western Indian Ocean**.

4. Reporting Mechanism: UKMTO operates **24/7 telephone and email channels** through which vessels report movements, incidents and emergencies.

UPI turns a decade-old, sees 13,000-fold surge in transaction volume

The Hindu Bureau

MUMBAI

The Unified Payments Interface (UPI), launched on August 25, 2016 by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), has completed 10 years of transforming digital payments in India.

UPI has emerged as the backbone of India's digital payments ecosystem and a critical driver of financial inclusion, the Finance Ministry said in a release.

Over the decade, UPI's annual transaction volume expanded from 1.78 crore transactions in FY17 to over 24,162 crore transactions in FY26, representing a 13,000-fold surge in transaction volume.



Annual transaction volume expanded from 1.78 crore in FY17 to 24,162 crore in FY26.

tional in 11 countries and has emerged as one of the most successful pillars of digital public infrastructure, providing an interoperable, real-time payments platform that enables seamless peer-to-peer and peer-to-merchant transactions via a single application. “By bridging the digi-

3. UPI at 10: Transforming India's Digital Payments

Source: The Hindu | **GS:** GS-III — Economy, Digital Public Infrastructure, Financial Inclusion

Context: The **Unified Payments Interface (UPI)** completed **10 years on 25 August 2026**. Over the decade, it has transformed India's digital payments ecosystem, with transaction volume rising nearly **13,000-fold**.

Basic Information

1. What is UPI?

UPI is a **real-time, interoperable digital payment system** that enables instant transfer of money between bank accounts through a single interface.

2. Who Operates It?

UPI was launched by the **National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI)** on **25 August 2016**.

3. How Does It Work?

It enables both **peer-to-peer (P2P)** and **peer-to-merchant (P2M)** payments through participating banks and payment applications.

4. Why Is It Different?

Its key features are **interoperability, real-time settlement and seamless transactions**, allowing users of different banks and applications to transact with each other.

Mains Perspective

I. UPI's Transformation

1. Unprecedented Scale: Transactions increased from **1.78 crore in FY17** to over **24,162 crore in FY26** — around a **13,000-fold rise**.

2. Rising Transaction Value: Transaction value increased from **₹0.07 lakh crore** to about **₹314 lakh crore** during the same period — over a **4,000-fold increase**.

3. Digital Public Infrastructure: UPI has become a major pillar of India's **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** by providing an interoperable payment layer.

II. Developmental Significance

1. Financial Inclusion: Simple and low-friction digital payments have expanded access to formal financial services.

2. Economic Formalisation: Greater digital transactions can reduce cash dependence, improve transaction records and encourage participation in the formal economy.

3. Wider Digital Participation: UPI has enabled individuals, small merchants and businesses to participate more easily in the digital economy.

4. Global Footprint: UPI is currently operational in **11 countries**, giving India an opportunity to promote its digital-payment architecture internationally.

III. **Challenges**

1. Cybersecurity: The enormous scale of transactions increases exposure to **fraud and cyber threats**.

2. Digital Divide: Smartphone access, internet connectivity and digital literacy remain important prerequisites for universal adoption.

3. Reliability: As UPI becomes central to everyday transactions, maintaining **resilience and uninterrupted availability** is crucial.

IV. **Way Forward**

1. Strengthen Cybersecurity: Improve fraud detection, authentication and consumer protection.

2. Ensure Inclusion: Expand digital literacy and connectivity so that the benefits reach digitally excluded groups.

3. Build Resilience: Ensure UPI remains **secure, scalable, interoperable and reliable** as transaction volumes grow.

4. Expand Internationally: Leverage UPI's global adoption to strengthen India's role in **digital financial infrastructure**.

India needs to reset its approach to relations with its neighbours

New Delhi must view these through a bilateral lens and redo its calculus based on future prospects



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It is clear that India's relationship with the countries in its neighbourhood is at an impasse. There are many reasons for this: global power shifts, political changes in neighbouring countries, the externalities of our domestic politics and, well, chance. There are new governments in Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, while the one in Maldives has tempered down after a few years in office. A young king in Bhutan has new ideas. There is a new spring in the Pakistani government's step, as its military leader enjoys international limelight after the country spent nearly 15 years out in the cold. New Delhi's relations with each of these countries could, to put it gently, be better. Given the mess that world politics is in, it might be a good time to reset the way New Delhi engages with them.

Indeed, the impasse might be an empirical signal that policy change is necessary. Twenty years ago, I was among those who argued the subcontinental neighbourhood is not as important as our relations with the US, China and East Asia because it was the latter that provided opportunities for rapid economic growth. India's domestic market was not only fragmented but largely untapped. New Delhi didn't say as much, but put the subcontinental neighbourhood on the back-burner even as it turned up the rhetoric and symbolism. That, I would argue, was the

right approach: the Indian economy has tripled in real terms over the past two decades on the back of a policy that intensified India's global engagement.

Contrary to what many observers believe, India is actually well placed to take a fresh view of how to engage its neighbours. Decades of high economic growth has not only created strength, but also incentive structures for better cross-border ties. What we need though is a new political approach. New Delhi should engage each neighbour for its own sake and not because they are moves on a geopolitical chessboard. It is not wrong to think along the lines of, 'We should do X in order to counter China,' but to allow such thinking to dominate policy is. Even small countries such as Maldives and Bhutan have agency and the region's policymakers do not spend all their time scheming over how to play India against China. They have their own fish to fry.

There is a recurring pattern in India's approach to the neighbourhood. *First*, there is a strong desire to keep external powers from gaining influence. *Second*, there is recognition in the country that New Delhi must offer asymmetric concessions to its smaller neighbours. *Third*, India prefers bilateralism over multilateralism, not least out of concern that regional organizations like Saarc may allow these neighbours to gang up. *Fourth*, Pakistan cannot be put in the same category as the other neighbours. *Fifth*, cooperation is denominated in infrastructure projects that take a long time to complete as India's legendary public sector units are handed the task.

New Delhi must break away from this pattern. Instead of using domestic politics, internal security or geopolitical anxiety as the primary lens through which foreign policy looks at the region, we should treat each neighbouring country in its own right. This means not being overly concerned about the influence China or the US might gain in that country, but focusing on what India seeks and can provide. Nepal and Bhutan

wish to develop hydroelectric power for export, while Bangladesh needs river water, intermediate inputs for its garment industry and energy for its economy. Sri Lanka and Maldives need fuel, food, finance and market access. India needs electricity from its Himalayan neighbours, transit and market access from Bangladesh and maritime cooperation with Sri Lanka as well as Maldives. There are many win-win deals to be made.

This can only happen if India relaxes the punitive or retaliatory restrictions it has imposed, specifically on Bangladesh and Nepal. Constantino Xavier, an Indian analyst of the neighbourhood, argues that New Delhi should look at asymmetric concessions as enlightened self-interest, not generosity. While squeezing transit or restricting trade and travel can achieve short-term goals through coercion, they come at the cost of losing long-term influence. It is in India's interests for the regional elite to be well-connected with it. A generation ago, Nepali families would send their children to India for higher education. Now they go to Singapore. Maldivians prefer Kuala Lumpur to Kochi. Bhutanese officials hang out with Silicon Valley mavens. International migration has connected subcontinental societies to Europe, Australia and West Asia. This need not come at India's cost, but it currently does because we are shutting our doors to them. The new pattern should change this.

The news headlines, of course, are captured by political problems such as Bangladesh's demand for Sheikh Hasina's extradition. It is a tough one. Dhaka has demanded what New Delhi cannot give. Even so, the way to manage it is by solving other problems that have larger payoffs, and making a habit of it. Jettisoning legacy issues and focusing on the future offers the best path forward, not least because Gen-Zs in the neighbourhood roll their eyeballs when you talk about the mess made by the previous generations.

4. India's Neighbourhood Policy: Need for a Strategic Reset

Source: Mint | GS: GS-II — India and its Neighbourhood

Context: India's neighbourhood is undergoing rapid **political, economic and strategic change**. India's growing economic weight gives it greater capacity to shape regional prosperity, but this requires moving from a predominantly **security/China-centric approach towards neighbour-centric, economically integrated diplomacy**.

I. Why the Neighbourhood Matters

- 1. Security:** A peaceful periphery is essential for India's **border security, regional stability and strategic interests**; this is also the rationale behind *Neighbourhood First*.
- 2. Economic Opportunity:** India's economic expansion can create markets, investment and connectivity opportunities for neighbouring economies.
- 3. Development Partnership:** India already has substantial economic stakes in the region—for example, India's FY2025-26 merchandise exports were about **\$10.59 billion to Bangladesh, \$7.45 billion to Nepal and \$5.52 billion to Sri Lanka**.
- 4. Regional Connectivity:** Energy, transport, trade and people-to-people links can convert geographical proximity into **economic interdependence**.

II. Problems with the Existing Approach

- 1. China-Centric Lens:** Viewing neighbours mainly through **Chinese influence** can overshadow their own aspirations and developmental priorities.
- 2. Asymmetric Power:** India's much larger economy creates a perception of an unequal relationship; hence, smaller neighbours need **greater sensitivity and policy flexibility**.
- 3. Coercive Instruments:** Excessive use of trade or transit restrictions may secure short-term leverage but can create **long-term distrust**.
- 4. Low Regional Integration:** Intra-regional trade in South Asia remains only around **5–6%**, far below the potential of a geographically contiguous region.

III. What the Strategic Reset Should Mean

1. Neighbour-Centric Diplomacy: Engage each country **on its own interests and future prospects**, rather than primarily as part of India's competition with China.

2. Enlightened Self-Interest: Concessions should be seen as **strategic investments**, not charity—greater connectivity and market access can create long-term Indian influence.

3. Development + Connectivity: Align India's capabilities with neighbours' needs—**hydropower, markets, water, energy, transit and infrastructure**—to create shared gains.

4. Asymmetric Accommodation: India's greater capacity should allow it to offer **asymmetric but mutually beneficial arrangements**, consistent with the established *Neighbourhood First* approach.

IV. Way Forward

1. Build Interdependence: Prioritise **trade, transit, energy grids, digital connectivity and cross-border infrastructure**.

2. Reduce Unnecessary Barriers: Make movement of **goods, people, energy and services** easier wherever security considerations permit.

3. Respect Strategic Autonomy: Treat neighbours as **partners with agency**, not as states whose choices must be managed.

4. Use Economic Strength Strategically: India has already extended about **\$7.86 billion in Lines of Credit to Bangladesh, \$1.65 billion to Nepal, over \$2 billion to Sri Lanka and \$1.43 billion to Maldives**; such development partnerships can be leveraged for deeper regional integration.

5. Strengthen Regional Platforms: Complement bilateral diplomacy with **SAARC, BIMSTEC and other regional mechanisms** wherever they can advance connectivity and economic cooperation.

• ECONOMICS

The other 'NEET' that India needs to address

A closer look at employment data shows, among other things, the sheer number of young Indians who are not in education, jobs or training



UDIT MISRA

YOUTH PROTESTS that forced the resignation of India's Union Education Minister almost exactly a month ago have not only brought the issue of education into sharp focus, but also highlighted concerns related to unemployment — especially among the youth.

Until now, the government has often cited data on the Unemployment Rate (UER) to suggest that Indians are doing well on the jobs front. The UER is calculated as the number of unemployed people within the total labour force (those currently working or looking for work). Official data from the Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) says that the UER has fallen steadily from 6.1% in 2017-18 — hitting a 45-year high — to just 3.1% in 2025.

This is the UER for those aged 15 years and above, suggesting that broadly, the Indian economy has been creating jobs. However, at least three immediate problems arise even if one looks only at the UER.

Youth unemployment: Growing worry

The first problem is that the UER for those between the ages of 15 and 29 years is still quite high, even though this number has also been falling. It has fallen from almost 18% in 2017-18 to around 10% in 2022-23 but has since stayed at this level.

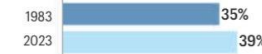
In fact, not only is the unemployment rate highest among the youth as a cohort, it rises with educational attainment. As **Chart 1** shows, graduates aged 25 face the highest unemployment rate — as high as almost 40%. It means that on average, 4 out of 10 graduates aged 25 years looking for work fail to get it.

The data is from the State of Working India (SWI) 2026 report by researchers at the Azim Premji University. They also calculated that the UER among young Indians with education up to graduation or more was actually higher in 2023 than in 1983.

While graduates being unemployed is not a new phenomenon in India, so much so that even movies of yesteryears capture this routine but crushing reality, the situation

CHART 1 • Unemployment rises with educational attainment

Graduate and above (among those below 25 years of age)



Graduate and above (25 to 29 years)



seems to be worsening over time.

Quality of jobs, not just quantity

The second problem is that while more jobs have been created since 2017-18, there is a big question mark on their quality. **Table 1** shows the size of the Indian workforce — the total number of people with a job. It has risen from 43.3 crore (or 433 million) in 2017-18 to around 61 crore as of December 2025.

But a closer look shows that most new jobs are either in agriculture or in pursuits that pay little or see stagnant earnings. The SWI 2026 pointed out: "In the post-Covid period India's employed population has increased... with employment rates rising from 71 to 74 percent for men and from 26 to 34 percent for women, between 2021-22 and 2023-24. But the majority of employment creation has been in agriculture. Of the 83 million jobs added between 2021-22 and 2023-24, 40 million have been in agriculture, with women accounting for a large share (38 million)."

Similarly, while women have increasingly joined India's workforce — from 94 million in 2017-18 to 186 million in 2023-24 — as **Chart 2** shows, most earn very little. "The number of women in own-account self-employment has seen a nearly four-fold increase since 2017. Self-employment earnings among women and salaried earnings (for men and women) have largely stagnated," states the report.

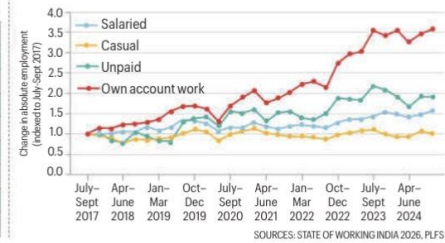
Unemployment rate misleads

Lastly, in a developing economy such as India, using the UER to assess job market stress can be deeply misleading. That's be-

TABLE 1 • Size of workforce (in millions)

Year	Male	Female	Total
2017-18	338	94	433
2018-19	343	97	440
2019-20	357	122	480
2020-21	357	126	483
2021-22	363	126	490
2022-23	349	128	477
2023-24	387	186	573
2025 (Jan-Dec)	416	206	616

CHART 2 • Only self-employment spikes for women



SOURCES: STATE OF WORKING INDIA 2026, PLFS

cause the unemployment rate is measured as a percentage of the people demanding a job. While this is a reasonable approach generally, in India, evidence shows that not everyone registers in official surveys as people looking for a job. As such, the number of people unemployed is often far more than what is captured.

Rosa Abraham, an associate professor of economics who teaches at APU and is one of the authors of the SWI report, told *The Indian Express*, "Unemployment is only measured when you are willing to work and/or searching for a job. But, especially in the case of women (in India), what would happen is that regardless of their education, and even when they have, say, completed graduation, they may not explicitly record or be recorded (in the surveys) as looking for work." Such women thus get counted out of the "labour force".

If these people were counted as unemployed, they would then be part of the labour force, and the unemployment rate would be much higher.

"So UER is really the lowest estimate of people who are not being mobilised into the workforce. There is an entire pool of people who are out of the labour force who are either discouraged workers, or there are social norms (often for women) that keep them out of work," explains Abraham.

The other NEET

Another metric better captures how the Indian economy is failing its youth. It is called NEET — an acronym for "Not in

Employment, Education, or Training".

NEET "is a comprehensive measure of this labour under-utilisation while excluding those in education or training. NEET not only includes the unemployed, but also those who are of working age and are neither in education/training nor employment," the APU report says.

Simply put, NEET presumes that many people may be pursuing education and, as such, they cannot be expected to join the workforce. So, NEET attempts to understand the share of people outside this umbrella.

According to PLFS data from March, 25% of Indian youth were NEET. Population projections by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare state that India's youth population in 2026 stood at 36.8 crore, making it the world's largest youth population. If one applies the same proportion of NEET to 2026, out of a total youth population of 36.8 million (36.8 crore), around 9.2 million or 9.2 crore are in NEET.

In other words, the number of Indian youth neither involved in education nor skilling nor any kind of employment today is around 9.2 crore — almost equal to the entire population of Iran.

Apart from the high youth unemployment rate, such a high absolute number of NEET population may explain the growing youth unrest in the country. It is also important to remember that these numbers are at a time when the government is happy with the pace of economic growth based on GDP figures, even calling it a "goldilocks" period.

5. India's Youth Employment Problem: Beyond Unemployment

Source: The Indian Express — Explained | **GS:** GS-III — Employment, Human Resources, Inclusive Growth

Context: Recent youth protests have brought unemployment and the quality of employment back into focus. Although India's official Unemployment Rate (UER) has declined, the article argues that UER

alone gives an incomplete picture because it misses **discouraged workers, underemployment, educated youth unemployment and young people outside employment, education or training.**

I. What the Employment Data Shows

- 1. UER Has Fallen:** UER declined from **6.1% in 2017-18 to 3.1% in 2025**, suggesting improvement in headline unemployment.
- 2. Youth Remains More Vulnerable:** For **15–29-year-olds**, unemployment fell from around **18% in 2017-18 to about 10% in 2022-23**, but remained much higher than the overall rate.
- 3. Education Does Not Guarantee Employment:** Graduate unemployment among those **below 25 years** increased from **35% in 1983 to 39% in 2023**; among graduates aged **25–29**, it rose from **12% to 20%**.
- 4. Growing Workforce:** India's workforce increased from **43.3 crore in 2017-18 to 61.6 crore in 2025**, creating an enormous requirement for productive employment.

II. The Bigger Problem: Quality of Jobs

- 1. Employment vs Productive Employment:** Falling unemployment does not necessarily mean good jobs. Much of the recent employment increase has been concentrated in **agriculture and self-employment**, raising concerns about earnings and productivity.
- 2. Agricultural Absorption:** Of the **83 lakh jobs added in 2021-22 and 2023-24**, around **40 million** were in agriculture, according to the article's cited *State of Working India* analysis.
- 3. Women's Employment:** Women's workforce participation increased substantially, but much of the rise has occurred through **own-account work**, while salaried employment has grown much less.
- 4. Earnings Remain a Concern:** The expansion of employment must be judged not merely by the number of jobs but by **wages, security, productivity and working conditions**.

III. Why UER Alone Can Mislead

- 1. Discouraged Workers:** People who stop searching for jobs leave the labour force and therefore may **not be counted as unemployed**.
- 2. Underemployment:** A person may be employed but working fewer hours, below their skill level or in **low-productivity work**.

3. Women Outside the Labour Force: Social norms, care responsibilities and other barriers can keep women outside the labour force; their absence is not reflected in the UER.

4. NEET Youth: A person outside both employment and education can remain largely invisible in conventional unemployment statistics.

IV. The “Other NEET” Problem

1. Scale: According to the data cited in the article, around **25% of Indian youth are NEET**.

2. Absolute Magnitude: With India’s youth population estimated at around **36.8 crore**, this translates to approximately **9.2 crore young people**.

3. Lost Demographic Dividend: NEET youth represent a loss of **human capital, productivity and future earnings**, particularly when prolonged disengagement occurs.

4. Beyond Unemployment: NEET captures a wider problem—young people who are **neither acquiring skills nor participating in the labour market**.

V. What India Needs

1. Quality Non-Farm Jobs: Expand **manufacturing and productive services** to absorb educated and young workers rather than relying excessively on agriculture.

2. Education-to-Employment Link: Align higher education, vocational training and skill development with **actual industry demand**.

3. Better Measurement: Assess labour-market health through **UER + LFPR + NEET + wages + job quality**, rather than UER alone.

4. Productive Women’s Employment: Ensure that rising female participation translates into **stable, remunerative and productive employment**, not merely self-employment.

5. Youth-Centric Employment Policy: Address the transition from **education → skills → employment**, particularly for graduates entering the labour market.

Nuclear energy could power India's future

RAMNI GUPTA

Growing populations, expanding industries, and rapidly increasing technological demands require reliable and affordable energy sources. At the same time, concerns about pollution and climate change are compelling governments to reconsider their dependence on conventional fossil fuels. As countries search for sustainable responses to rising energy demands and technological challenges, nuclear energy can play an important role in improving the quality of life. It can generate electricity with very low greenhouse-gas emissions, making nuclear power an important component of a diversified low-carbon and reliable energy system.

Beyond electricity generation, nuclear technology contributes to healthcare through cancer diagnosis and treatment, supports agricultural productivity and food preservation, assists industries through advanced testing and quality-control techniques, and enables scientific research, environmental monitoring, and even deep-space exploration.

There is no doubt that nuclear technology possesses immense power; however, when used irresponsibly, this power can have enormous destructive consequences. The misuse of nuclear technology can result in devastating human and environmental impacts. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 caused the immediate deaths of more than 200,000 people and exposed countless survivors to high levels of ionizing radiation, with long-term consequences including increased risks of cancer and other health complications.

The Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster in 1986 in Ukraine and the Goiânia accident in 1987 in Brazil released radioactive material into the environment and caused severe and long-lasting ecological and public-health consequences. These events demonstrated the potentially serious consequences of failures in nuclear safety, security, and responsible handling of radioactive materials.

The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident in 2011, triggered by a massive earthquake and tsunami, reinforced the importance of stringent safety standards, robust emergency preparedness, and effective regulatory oversight in the peaceful use of nuclear technology. These events serve as enduring lessons, not to reject nuclear science, but to ensure that it is developed and applied with the highest levels of scientific integrity, safety, and ethical responsibility.

These tragic episodes, however, cannot overshadow the immense benefits that nuclear technology has brought to humanity. Every day, a large number of people benefit from nuclear medicine through the diagnosis and treatment of diseases. As the world seeks sustainable development while addressing climate change, nuclear energy has emerged as an important component of a diversified low-carbon energy portfolio. The challenge, therefore, is not whether humanity should use nuclear technology, but how it should be used responsibly.

Guided by ethical principles, scientific excellence, and international cooperation, nuclear technology can continue to serve humanity through low-carbon energy, better healthcare, food security, industrial innovation, and scientific progress while ensuring that the mistakes of the past are never repeated.

Among the peaceful applications of nuclear technology, nuclear power

plants stand out as one of the most significant achievements. They provide large-scale, reliable, and low-carbon electricity while helping to reduce dependence on fossil fuels. In this direction, the Government of India has formulated a clear roadmap to expand the country's nuclear energy programme and establish a strong foundation for its future growth.

Recently, the government announced a dedicated Nuclear Energy Mission for Viksit Bharat, focused on research and development of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), which offer potential advantages in terms of flexibility, deployment, and safety. Around Rs 20,000 crore has been allocated, with a goal of developing at least five indigenous SMRs by around 2033.

The government has articulated a long-term vision to significantly expand nuclear generation capacity to 100 GW by 2047 as part of India's energy-security and low-carbon development goals under the broader Viksit Bharat framework. Scientists are working to develop an indigenous reactor design known as the Bharat Small Modular Reactor, with the aim of building compact reactors that can be deployed more flexibly and potentially closer to industrial clusters. Such developments indicate a growing emphasis on indigenous reactor technology and on strengthening India's domestic capabilities across the nuclear sector.

Recent policy discussions and legislative initiatives have also aimed at opening parts of the nuclear ecosystem to greater private-industry involvement, including manufacturing, equipment, and selected operational activities. This would represent a significant shift from India's historically state-dominated nuclear structure and could provide greater scope for private-sector participation.



India has increasingly adopted a "fleet mode" approach - building multiple standardized indigenous reactors together rather than treating each project as an isolated undertaking. Projects involving multiple indigenous 700-MW reactors are part of this strategy. For a country like India, such initiatives are significant not simply because they can increase electricity generation, but because they address several national priorities, including energy security, economic growth, environmental goals, technological advancement, and strategic independence.

These developments in nuclear policy, emphasizing indigenous technologies, small modular reactors, and greater private-sector participation, are expected to contribute significantly to India's long-term energy security.

This transition is not merely a change in the way nuclear power is produced; it represents a strategic choice about the kind of energy future India seeks to build. The country cannot afford to overlook nuclear energy while striving to meet its rapidly growing energy demand, reduce carbon emissions, and maintain

strategic autonomy. With uncompromising standards of safety, strong regulatory oversight, skilled human resources, and responsible private participation, nuclear energy can become one of the important pillars of India's energy security and technological self-reliance. The expansion of India's nuclear programme is therefore not simply about adding more megawatts - it is about securing the nation's energy future and strengthening its capacity to shape its own technological and strategic destiny. The success of this transition, however, will depend not only on expanding nuclear capacity but also on maintaining the highest standards of safety, strengthening regulatory oversight, developing skilled human resources, ensuring responsible management of radioactive materials, and building public confidence.

A balanced and responsible expansion of nuclear energy can therefore become an important pillar of India's journey towards a secure, sustainable, technologically advanced, and self-reliant energy future.

The writer is Professor, Department of Physics, University of Jammu.

6. Nuclear Energy: Powering India's Clean-Energy Future

Source: The Statesman| **GS:** GS-III — Energy, Environment, Science & Technology

Context: India is seeking to expand nuclear power to meet rising energy demand, reduce fossil-fuel dependence and support its **long-term low-carbon transition**. Recent policy changes, indigenous reactor development and greater private participation are aimed at scaling up the sector.

Basic Information

1. Nuclear Energy: Electricity generated through controlled **nuclear fission**; it provides reliable, large-scale and low-carbon power.

2. India's Target: The government aims to increase nuclear capacity to **100 GW by 2047**.

3. Nuclear Energy Mission: ₹20,000 crore has been allocated to develop at least **five indigenous Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) by 2033**.

I. Why Nuclear Energy Matters

1. Energy Security: Nuclear power provides reliable electricity and can reduce dependence on imported fossil fuels.

2. Decarbonisation: It offers **low-carbon, round-the-clock power**, complementing intermittent renewable sources such as solar and wind.

3. Industrial Development: Reliable electricity is essential for **manufacturing, healthcare, agriculture and emerging technologies**.

4. Strategic Autonomy: Indigenous reactor technologies can strengthen India's **technological self-reliance and energy security**.

II. India's Nuclear Push

1. Indigenous Technology: India is developing **Small Modular Reactors (SMRs)** that can offer greater flexibility, standardisation and potentially faster deployment.

2. Criticality Milestone: The **500 MWe Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) at Kalpakkam** recently achieved **first criticality**, marking an important step in India's three-stage nuclear programme and future utilisation of its thorium resources.

3. Private-Sector Participation: The **SHANTI Act, 2025** seeks to open selected parts of the nuclear sector to licensed private participation, including nuclear power generation and related activities, while retaining government control over sensitive areas.

4. Fleet-Mode Development: India is moving towards **standardised indigenous reactor designs**, which can facilitate larger-scale and more cost-effective deployment.

III. Key Challenges

1. Nuclear Safety: Chernobyl and Fukushima demonstrate the potentially severe consequences of nuclear accidents; expansion therefore requires stringent safety standards.

2. Radioactive Waste: Safe storage, disposal and long-term management of radioactive materials remain critical.

3. Regulation: Greater private participation requires **strong, independent and technically capable regulatory oversight**.

4. Public Confidence: Nuclear expansion must address concerns regarding safety, liability, environmental impact and emergency preparedness.

IV. Way Forward

1. Safety with Scale: Expand nuclear capacity without compromising **safety and regulatory standards**.

2. Indigenous Innovation: Accelerate **PFBR, SMRs and other indigenous technologies** to reduce technological dependence.

3. Responsible Private Participation: Mobilise private capital and expertise while maintaining **strategic and regulatory oversight**.

4. Skilled Workforce: Develop specialised human resources in **nuclear engineering, safety and waste management**.

5. Balanced Energy Mix: Integrate nuclear power with **renewables and energy storage** to build a reliable low-carbon electricity system.

U.S. administration proposes \$1.03 lakh fee for H-1B visas

Press Trust of India

WASHINGTON

The U.S. on Monday proposed a \$103,265 fee for all H-1B visa cap-subject applications, including those eligible for the advanced degree exemption, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said.

The new proposal came a month after a federal appeals court rejected a plea to stay a district judge's order overturning the [Donald] Trump administration plan to charge a \$1,00,000 fee for H-1B visa applications.

"...DHS proposes to implement the USD 103,265 amount as a separate, additional H-1B fee rather than combining it with the exist-

It said the fee would apply only to H-1B cap-subject petitions, including those eligible for the advanced degree exemption, but not to cap-exempt filings.

The proposed fee is specifically to recover the interagency costs described in this rule and having a standalone fee is intended to facilitate tracking, allocation, and reporting of the associated revenue, the DHS said.

The U.S. Congress set the current annual regular cap for the H-1B category at 65,000, commonly known as the "regular cap". It also set aside 20,000 additional H-1B visas for workers who hold a Master's degree or higher from a U.S. college,

7. U.S. H-1B Fee Hike: Implications for India

Source: The Hindu | **GS:** GS-II — India–U.S. Relations, Indian Diaspora | GS-III — Services, Employment

Context: The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has **proposed an additional \$103,265 fee for H-1B cap-subject petitions**, including those eligible for the advanced-degree exemption. The proposal is **not yet final** and will undergo public consultation before implementation.

Basic Information

- 1. H-1B Visa:** A U.S. non-immigrant visa allowing employers to hire foreign professionals in **specialty occupations**, particularly technology, engineering, research and other skilled sectors.
- 2. Annual Cap: 85,000 new H-1B visas — 65,000 regular + 20,000** for qualifying advanced-degree holders from U.S. institutions.
- 3. Proposed Fee: \$103,265**, in addition to existing H-1B fees; it would apply to **cap-subject petitions**, while cap-exempt filings are excluded.

I. Why It Matters for India

- 1. Indians Are the Largest Beneficiaries:** In FY2025, Indians received about **2.83 lakh H-1B visas**, around **70% of total H-1B visas including extensions**; Indians also received nearly **58,000 initial-employment visas**.
- 2. Impact on Indian IT:** The huge additional cost could make U.S. employers less willing to hire foreign skilled workers, affecting Indian **Information Technology companies and professionals**.
- 3. Student-to-Worker Pathway:** The proposal could also affect international students in the U.S. moving from **F-1 status to H-1B**, because the fee is linked to whether the petition is cap-subject rather than simply where the applicant is located.
- 4. India–U.S. Economic Linkages:** Restrictions on skilled mobility could affect **services trade, technology cooperation, innovation and the Indian diaspora**, making skilled-worker mobility an important part of bilateral economic relations.

II. Wider Concerns

- 1. Protectionism:** The move reflects the broader **“America First” approach** of prioritising domestic workers and reducing dependence on foreign skilled labour.

2. Talent Competitiveness: Excessive restrictions could make the U.S. less attractive to global talent and potentially benefit competing innovation hubs.

3. Employer Costs: The fee could particularly burden **start-ups and smaller firms** that cannot absorb such a large additional hiring cost. DHS estimates around **14,541 small entities** could be affected.

III. Way Forward for India

1. Diversify Global Opportunities: Indian professionals and IT firms should expand into **Europe, Australia, Japan, West Asia and other technology markets.**

2. Move Up the Value Chain: Strengthen domestic capabilities in **Artificial Intelligence, semiconductors, advanced manufacturing and high-end services.**

3. Diplomatic Engagement: India should raise concerns through **India–U.S. economic and diplomatic dialogue**, while respecting U.S. immigration policy.

4. Build Domestic Talent Ecosystem: Greater investment in **research, higher education and skilled employment** can reduce excessive dependence on overseas opportunities.