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WHAT IS IT?

Hectocotylus: a mating arm

Vasudevan Mukunth

Octopuses often live solitary lives and rarely encounter mates, which means they need to be very good at recognising other octopuses if they are to have reproductive success.

Now, researchers have found that male octopuses have a specialised arm, known as the hectocotylus, as a sophisticated sensory organ to identify females. Scientists previously thought this arm served as a tool to deliver sperm, but the new work has revealed that the hectocotylus actually 'tastes' the female by touching her.

Specifically, the hectocotylus detects progesterone, a hormone found in the female's reproductive tract and skin. Once it does, the male locates the oviduct for insemination. And the hectocotylus allows males to do this even in complete darkness.

The researchers also found a receptor called CRT1 that triggers mating behaviour. CRT1 evolved from ancient neurotransmitter receptors and today serves two purposes. While the octopus uses similar receptors to hunt for prey by sensing chemical compounds on the seafloor, CRT1 has also specialised over millions of years to recognise progesterone with a high affinity.

By analysing various cephalopod species, the team found that this evolutionary innovation is a widespread trait across both octopuses and squids and that it merges sensory assessment and gamete delivery into a single appendage, allowing the octopuses to reproduce efficiently during their brief encounters.

Researchers found that male octopuses have a specialised arm, known as the hectocotylus, a sensory organ to identify females. H. ZELL (CC BY-SA)

The findings also highlight how small changes in protein structures can help organisms develop complex new behaviours, and contribute to the already vast biodiversity of the oceans.

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to **science@thehindu.co.in** with the subject 'Daily page'

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THE HINDU PAGE : 8

The World Trade Organization is flailing

Prabhash Ranjan

Professor and Vice Dean (Research), Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal Global University

Trade multilateralism is facing its biggest stress test since the Second World War. The United States' coercive unilateralism and attempts to dilute foundational rules such as the most-favoured nation (MFN) treatment threaten to hollow out the entire system. At such a critical juncture in history, the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s fourteenth Ministerial Conference (MC14), which recently concluded in Yaoundé, Cameroon (March 2026), was expected to reassure the global community about the importance of a rules-based global trading order, which limits hegemonic tendencies.

Regrettably, the MC14 failed to meet this challenge. While no one expected the MC14 to turn up trumps, the fact that the 166-member WTO failed to reach consensus on even issuing a ministerial declaration outlining future work is disconcerting. To paper over the cracks, the WTO's Director General declared that the MC14 had produced a Yaoundé package comprising certain draft decisions, that is, decisions yet to be finalised, which will be discussed at Geneva in the months ahead.

Tale of two moratoriums

The MC14 will go down in history as the one that broke the long-standing consensus on moratoriums for two things. First, customs duties on electronic commerce transactions. Since 1998, WTO member-countries agreed not to impose customs duties on electronic commerce transactions to keep digital trade flows free. The moratorium has been extended every two years since its inception. However, at MC14, countries were unable to reach an agreement on extending the moratorium, which, thus, lapsed on March 31.

Today, countries are free to impose tariffs on digital trade flows, though it is expected that the WTO's General Council will deliberate on this issue again in the months ahead. While this may provide developing countries with an opportunity to augment their revenue, it will burden consumers and businesses. A significant development that accompanied the end of the e-commerce moratorium was the signing of an e-commerce agreement (ECA) by 66 WTO members, which prohibits customs duties on digital trade.

The WTO's fourteenth Ministerial Conference has showed up the cracks in the rules-based system

Although not yet part of the WTO rulebook and binding only for the signatories, this agreement will establish two separate legal frameworks: the WTO, which allows tariffs on digital trade, and the ECA, which does not.

The second moratorium, in force since 1995, barred non-violation complaints under the WTO's TRIPS Agreement. The WTO allows countries to file claims not only for legal violations but also when a country's measures nullify another country's anticipated benefits, even if those measures are legal.

This raises concerns for developing nations that their laws to promote public health could provoke complaints from developed countries alleging that they nullify the benefits of their intellectual property. Although such complaints are possible, history suggests they are unlikely to succeed, as evidenced by the failure of all 10 non-violation complaints related to trade in goods at the WTO.

Plurilateral innovation

A so-called low-hanging fruit at the MC14 was the incorporation of the plurilateral Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) agreement into Annex 4 of the WTO Agreement, with support from 129 of 166 countries. However, it did not materialise due to India's opposition. New Delhi opposed the IFD's inclusion for multiple reasons, including the absence of legal safeguards to incorporate plurilateral agreements into the WTO acquis.

Plurilateral agreements to be incorporated into the WTO should be open and inclusive rather than exclusive. The failure to include the IFD Agreement has deepened the WTO's legislative crisis, as the organisation struggles to establish rules for 21st century challenges.

No road map for the future

The MC14 failed to provide a clear road map for WTO reforms. Critical issues such as reviving the stalled appellate function of the WTO's dispute settlement system have been postponed. Any attempts by the developed world, especially the U.S., to undermine key principles, such as MFN and the special and differential treatment, must be strongly resisted.

It is often said that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. The history of trade multilateralism demonstrates that whenever trade multilateralism slows, American unilateralism tends to rise. This occurred in the early 1970s when the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations floundered, leading to the enactment of strict measures such as Section 301 of the U.S. Trade Act of 1974. This provision empowers the U.S. President to take unilateral action against perceived unfair trade practices. We are currently witnessing a similar situation, but this time without Congressional approval and with far greater vengeance. A setback at the MC14 will exacerbate these trends.

Additionally, the failure of the MC14 will accelerate the trend of countries creating new trade rules outside the WTO. To keep the WTO relevant, innovative solutions must be found, such as plurilateralising the WTO. India should take the lead in developing the legal guardrails needed for the development and adoption of plurilateral agreements within the WTO. Achieving this will require a novel approach and unflinching political commitment to trade multilateralism.

The views expressed are personal

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How to fast-track reservation for women in Parliament — a roadmap

S Y Quraishi

THE GOVERNMENT'S decision, reported in the media, to convene additional sittings of Parliament to debate amendments to the Women's Reservation Act, 2023, is a welcome and significant step. It signals that a historic reform has now entered the difficult phase of implementation.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi deserves full credit for accomplishing what had eluded Parliament for nearly three decades. The passage of the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, providing one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, was a landmark step. For 26 years, the proposal remained stalled. Its enactment demonstrated political will.

But every reform must answer one question: How will it be implemented?

Current discussions suggest that the strength of the Lok Sabha may be increased from 543 to about 816 seats — an addition of 273 seats. If this entire block of additional seats is reserved for women, it would immediately ensure that one-third of the enlarged House is composed of women, without displacing existing members.

Yet one basic issue remains unaddressed: Where will women contest from?

New seats require constituencies. Constituencies can only be created through delimitation. And delimitation, by law, can only follow a Census. The next Census is expected after 2026. Even if everything moves quickly, the publication of data, the constitution of a Delimitation Commission, and the completion of its work will take several years. Past experience suggests that delimitation cannot be completed before 2032 or 2033.

This creates a simple difficulty. If constituencies do not exist, elections cannot be held. Without delimitation, there is no electoral map within which reservation can operate.

There is also another constitutional issue. The Constitution itself freezes the allocation of seats among states until after the first Census conducted after 2026. Any attempt to change this arrangement earlier would require another constitutional amendment and may reopen the sensitive question of representation between the northern and southern states.

The Home Minister has tried to address this concern by saying that the balance between the northern and southern states will be maintained, and that any increase in seats will be proportional across states. In the absence of a better formula, this approach appears most reasonable. Yet it must be recognised that proportionality preserves ratios, not influence. Larger states will still gain more seats in absolute numbers. Parliament votes by numbers, not by proportions. Even so, since no alternative has yet been suggested, this may be the most acceptable compromise for now.

But even if this issue is set aside, the central question remains: How will women contest elections without constituencies?

There is a way forward.

We need not assume that every Member of Parliament must come from a territorial constituency. Many democracies combine constituency-based elections with proportional representation. In such systems, some members are elected from constituencies, while others are chosen on the basis of vote share of political parties. This is the PR model. India can adopt a limited version of this model as a temporary arrangement.

The existing 543 constituencies can remain unchanged. Elections to these seats can continue as they are. Alongside, an additional block of seats can be created exclusively for women. These seats need not be linked to constituencies. Instead, they can be allocated to political parties or alliances in proportion to their vote share.

> Many democracies combine constituency-based elections with proportional representation. Some members are elected from constituencies, others are chosen on the basis of vote share of political parties

If one applies the broad pattern of the last general election, the ruling alliance would receive the largest share of these seats, followed by the principal opposition alliance, with the rest going to other parties. Within each alliance, seats can then be distributed among constituent parties.

This ensures that representation reflects the mandate of the electorate, while also maintaining political stability. No party or alliance is unfairly disadvantaged.

After the election, each party's or alliance's vote share would determine its share of these additional seats. Parties would nominate women from pre-declared lists. This would ensure fairness, transparency, and predictability.

This approach solves the main problem. Women's reservation can be implemented without waiting for delimitation. No constituency needs to be created.

It has other advantages. It reflects the will of voters more accurately, since it is based on vote share. It lowers the barriers that women candidates face in costly elections. In effect, it is an election with zero additional cost.

It is important to clarify that reservation is a minimum guarantee, not a ceiling. Women will continue to contest and win from general constituencies; the additional seats are over and above this number.

The new Parliament building, designed to accommodate a much larger House of up to 888 members, offers an opportunity that did not exist earlier. Whether or not this was envisaged at the time, the infrastructure and capacity are now in place. With both political will and institutional readiness available, there is little reason to defer implementation for another decade.

If this approach is accepted, women's reservation can be implemented as early as the 2029 general election without waiting for delimitation. Indeed, there is no constitutional principle that requires us to wait even that long. Once Parliament accepts proportional allocation, additional seats for women can be created and filled on the basis of the most recent electoral mandate. A constitutional promise need not wait for the next election cycle to be honoured.

In fact, the logic of the proposal permits an even earlier step. The additional seats could be introduced in the current Lok Sabha itself, through a constitutional amendment, using the vote shares of the most recent general election. This would immediately enhance women's representation without disturbing the existing mandate. What is required is not another election, but a decision. This may sound radical or revolutionary but it is doable.

All it requires is a constitutional amendment. Parliament has already shown that it can act. The Constitution has already been amended to recognise women's right to representation; it can be amended again to ensure that this right is not delayed.

This arrangement need not be permanent. It can operate for one or two elections. Once delimitation is completed, constituencies can be redrawn and seats can be reserved within the normal electoral system, should that be the choice.

What is at stake is not a technical detail; it is the credibility of a constitutional promise.The House has already been built. The question is whether we are ready to fill it.

Quraishi is former chief election commissioner of India and author of Democracy's Heartland: Inside the Battle for Power in South Asia

GS 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 10

Mothers require better healthcare, not just access

A STUDY published in *The Lancet Obstetrics, Gynaecology & Women's Health* last week has underscored the successes of the country's maternal health programme. But it has also flagged a worrying slowdown in progress since 2015. Maternal mortality in 2023 was nearly a fifth of what it was in 1990. The steepest decline occurred in the first decade and a half of this century, driven largely by more effective government interventions, a rise in institutional deliveries, and greater public awareness. Yet, India still accounts for one in 10 maternal deaths globally, and the report highlights persistent systemic challenges that stand in the way of meeting the Sustainable Development Goal of reducing maternal mortality to 70 deaths per lakh births by 2030. Pregnant women continue to die due to haemorrhages, infections, and blood pressure-related disorders.

The Covid pandemic exposed the fragility of India's maternal health programme. Frontline workers were diverted to meet the crisis, institutional deliveries were delayed and antenatal visits fell. The government has shown awareness of the challenge. It has strengthened programmes like LaQshya to improve the quality of care in labour rooms. The Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan has emphasised the use of online portals and a greater role for anganwadi workers in tracking the health of pregnant women. However, implementation remains uneven. Health is a state subject, and the efficacy of the government's programmes depends on local administrative capacity and political will. While Gujarat, Maharashtra, and the states in South India are on track to meet the SDG goal, government reports and the *Lancet* study highlight gaps in the healthcare systems of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Assam.

Addressing these deficits requires a decisive shift in strategy. Strengthening primary and secondary healthcare systems is essential so that complications are detected early and managed promptly. Functional emergency transport systems, well-equipped labour rooms, availability of specialists, and access to blood banks can mean the difference between life and death. At the same time, policies focused solely on expanding healthcare infrastructure will fall short unless they account for the social determinants of health. It's well-known that large sections of women eat last and their nutritional requirements are not met, leading to anaemia and poor health outcomes. The *Lancet* report's message on a comprehensive strategy that combines improving healthcare with increasing the social agency of women should not be lost on policymakers.

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APAR GUPTA

IT rules have made the internet less free

PULKIT MANI, a 26-year-old stand-up comic, is one of the many young Indians who find humour in a world caught up in cycles of violence, failing to provide safety and hope. If you accessed social media last month, his short video was impossible to ignore. On March 18, it was blocked on Instagram under Section 79(3)(b) of the IT Act, for which Pulkit has only received a terse notice from the social media platform. The Centre has not told him why his video is illegal, nor has he been given the opportunity of a hearing or a reasoned order. His experience is typical of what has been an alarming rise in government-directed censorship online.

This power resides in the Information Technology Rules, 2021, issued on February 25, 2021 through an executive order and then expanded continuously through notification. Each amendment has expanded executive power and undermined user rights. Its provisions have been challenged in different high courts, which have granted interim orders restraining enforcement, striking some down as unconstitutional, upholding some. However, all these cases remain pending final legal determination. The high threshold in a successful constitutional challenge and pendency have afforded the opportunity for the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) to continuously expand censorial and surveillance powers.

> On March 30, MeitY proposed amendments that include expanding the censorship powers over digital news media platforms to any social media user who comments on current affairs and politics

The IT Rules, 2021, were earlier expanded on February 10, compressing takedown timelines to three hours. The amendments did not contain any exemptions for parody and satire, and in many ways rekindled a fact-checking power for AI-generated content. Before that, on October 10, 2025, insertions in the Act gave support to the Sahyog censorship portal, in which now more than 35 state police officers and eight central agencies can order content takedowns. In addition, there is also the power for the Union government to block websites under Section 69A, which offers some modicum of procedural fairness. However, none of them are being followed. Multiple, overlapping legal powers for censorship are being used. A user does not know why or by whom they have been censored. Evidence for this is found aplenty over the past three weeks with notices of account restrictions and content takedowns on social media.

The situation is about to get much worse. On March 30, MeitY proposed further amendments that include expanding the censorship powers over digital news media platforms to any social media user who comments on current affairs and politics. Not only is this dangerous, but it is also a camouflage for bringing in regulations proposed under the Broadcasting Bill, 2024, which stalled due to widespread public outrage. Beyond this, MeitY wants to make informal instruments not grounded within the parent statute, such as advisories and SOPs, have legal force without the need to publish them. Another change is that the mandatory data retention timelines for intermediaries, which also include our online email providers or ISPs, will no longer be capped at three months. To riff on Kanye, "no one government should have all that power".

It is unfortunate that Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has repeatedly deflected demands for accountability and has framed changes to the IT Rules as a response to deepfakes and AI-generated misinformation. At the AI Impact Summit in February, he called India's approach a "global benchmark". Clearly, the country has a long way to go towards that.

The writer is an advocate and founder director, Internet Freedom Foundation

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• LAW

Trans rights: How 2026 Amendment Act deviates from decade-long judicial arc

Vineet Bhalla
New Delhi, April 5

THE TRANSGENDER Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026, marks a departure in the evolution of transgender rights over the last decade. Since the landmark NALSA judgment, constitutional courts have consistently interpreted the law to expand the rights and liberties of the transgender community, emphasising personal autonomy, often in contrast with the legislative and executive approach.

Core conflict

The bedrock of transgender jurisprudence is the Supreme Court's 2014 judgment in *National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India*. In it, the court legally recognised transgender persons as the "third gender" and recognised the right to self-identification, framing it as a fundamental right. It also located self-identification within the right to freedom of expression under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution.

In 2018, the SC in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* decriminalised consensual same-sex relations, ruling that sexual orientation and gender identity are innate.

High Courts have ever since consistently applied this principle to prevent state and institutional interference in an individual's self-identified gender. In 2020, the Madras HC affirmed this while confirming that sexual harassment laws apply to transwomen. Reiterating this, the Kerala HC held in 2023 that "[t]he right to choose gender is vested with the individual concerned and no one else, not even the court".

On the issue of official documentation, HCs have consistently directed state authorities and educational boards to update names and genders on educational certificates based on self-identification, without demanding medical proof.

In the realm of employment, the Madras HC in 2014 ruled that compelling a person to undergo a medical examination to prove their gender violates their right to privacy and dignity. Similarly, the Kerala HC in 2020 allowed a transwoman to enter the National Cadet Corps Girls Division, overriding gender-binary recruitment rules.

When it comes to contesting elections, the Patna and Bombay HCs have, in separate rulings, allowed transwomen the right to contest local elections for seats reserved for women. The Bombay HC's verdict led to the petitioner Anjali Guru Sanjana Jaan, then a 42-year old Muslim transwoman, claiming a historic victory in the Bhadli Budruk gram panchayat election in 2021.

Courts have also protected the right to family and relationships. In 2019, the Madras HC upheld a marriage between a man and a transwoman under the Hindu Marriage Act, ruling that the term "bride" includes transgender women.

During a protest against the 2026 Amendment Act in Pune on March 31. ARUL HORIZON

In the *Supriyo v. Union of India* marriage equality case in 2023, the SC affirmed that transgender persons in heterosexual relationships have the right to marry under existing laws. In 2020, the Orissa HC in 2020 granted police protection to a transman and his female partner, upholding their right to a live-in relationship.

The 2026 Amendment Act goes against this by removing the definition of a transgender person based on self-perceived identity. Instead, it mandates that a certificate of transgender identity will only be issued by a district magistrate after examining the recommendation of a designated medical board, headed by a chief medical officer.

It deletes categories like "trans-man", "trans-woman", and "genderqueer" from the definition of "transgender person" in the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, and explicitly mandates surgery to obtain a revised certificate for a change in gender.

'Omissive discrimination'

The judiciary's expansion of rights stood in contrast to the back-and-forth in Parliament to pass the 2019 Act. Following the *NALSA* verdict, a Private Member's Bill drafted by DMK MP Tiruchi Siva was passed in Rajya Sabha in 2015. However, the government subsequently drafted its own versions in 2016 and in 2018. Both drafts faced backlash over provisions criminalising begging — a traditional source of livelihood for many in the community — and introduction of district screening committees to certify gender.

While the eventual 2019 Act did away with the screening committees, it still required proof of surgery to change one's gender to male or female. This, and other provisions, were challenged before the SC in 2020 — the matter remains pending.

Even after the 2019 Act was passed, its implementation faced challenges, prompting courts to intervene. In October 2025, the SC's judgment in *Jane Kaushik v. Union of India* criticised the Union and state governments for their "administrative lethargy" and what it termed "omissive discrimination" — discrimination caused by the State's failure to act.

It ordered the Centre to form an advisory committee and implement the law in letter and spirit. However, the 2026 Amendment Act, reintroducing medical boards for gender certification and removing self-identification, was brought in without consulting the committee.