EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THE HINDU

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India, Australia move to deepen cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Amid geostrategic uncertainties, Prime Minister Modi, his Australian counterpart, Albanese, adopt declaration to expand maritime security ties and defence collaboration; the countries also seal pacts on civil nuclear energy and critical minerals

Saurabh Trivedi

NEW DELHI

India and Australia on Thursday adopted a Joint Declaration on Defence and Security Cooperation, committing to significantly deepen military engagement, strengthen defence industrial collaboration, and expand maritime security cooperation amid growing geostrategic uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific region. The two countries also sealed pacts on civil nuclear energy and critical minerals sectors.

The declaration, adopted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Australian counterpart, Anthony Albanese, outlines an ambitious road map to elevate defence ties through strategic consultations, enhanced interoperability between the armed forces, expanded military exercises, and greater collaboration in defence science, technology, and industrial supply chains.

A statement released by the office of the Australian Prime Minister mentioned that, under the declaration, the two sides agreed to hold regular consultations on defence-related developments in the Indo-Pacific affecting their shared interests, increase the complexity of bilateral and multilateral military exercises, accelerate efforts to improve interoperability and information sharing between their armed forces, and expand aircraft deployments from each other's territories.

Tactical ties: Prime Minister Narendra Modi being greeted by his Australian counterpart, Anthony Albanese, in Melbourne on Thursday. AP

The deal also envisages deeper personnel exchanges through education, training, and liaison appointments, while exploring opportunities to cooperate in recruiting skilled personnel for their respective defence workforces.

Mr. Modi emphasised the importance of a free and stable Indo-Pacific and highlighted the growing engagement between the two nations in the defence domain. "The Indo-Pacific is not just the confluence of two oceans. It also symbolises the shared aspirations of like-minded democracies like India and Australia," he said.

The agreement on civil nuclear energy to facilitate the commercial supply of uranium from Australia to India to fuel nuclear power projects came nearly 12 years after the two countries inked a historic civil nuclear cooperation pact.

"Today, we have signed an important agreement in the field of nuclear energy. This will open the way for uranium supplies from Australia to India and give new impetus to our clean energy objectives," he said.

He also announced the launch of the Australia-India Partnership on Cyber, Critical Technologies, and Supply Chains and said both sides will also work together on a critical minerals corridor.

Under the provisions of the energy security framework, India and Australia vowed to strengthen energy security by maintaining a stable, secure and reliable supply of coal, diesel, other liquid fuels and natural gas. The two countries will implement an India-Australia Maritime Security Collaboration Road Map to strengthen coordination across the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific.

Both sides committed to encouraging greater integration between their defence industries, building resilient supply chains and expanding collaboration in defence innovation, science and technology.

The leaders noted that the new declaration builds upon the India-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation signed in 2009 and complements existing institutional mechanisms, including the Foreign Ministers' Framework Dialogue, 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Dialogue, and Defence Ministers' Dialogue. They also reiterated support for regional institutions, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association, ASEAN-led regional architecture and the Pacific Islands Forum, describing them as key platforms for addressing regional challenges.

(With inputs from PTI)

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Australia announces repatriation of three antiquities taken from Tamil Nadu temples

R. Sivaraman
CHENNAI

Australia will repatriate three ancient artefacts stolen from temples in Tamil Nadu, including a Chola-era bronze trident, a granite Nandi idol and a Karthikeya sculpture, in a move announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the country.

The Union Ministry of Culture said in a press statement, "In a profound testament to the civilisational resonance anchoring modern diplomacy, Australia is set to repatriate three culturally significant ancient antiquities to India. These artefacts include a ceremonial bronze trident of Goddess Bhadrakali, a majestic granite idol of Nandi, and a basalt sculpture depicting the six-headed Karthikeya." All these items date back to the 11th and 12th Centuries and were originally sourced from temples in Tamil Nadu. The official announcement of the repatriation coincides with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Australia, further emphasising the strong cultural alignment between the two nations, the Ministry said.

Precious legacy: A Nandi sculpture, a Karthikeya (Shanmukha) idol and a Bhadrakali trident are among the antiquities that are to be returned. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The three antiquities, currently housed in the National Gallery of Australia, are being repatriated under the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) after investigations by the Tamil Nadu Idol Wing CID established that they had been removed from temples in Tamil Nadu and trafficked overseas.

Commenting on the repatriation of the idols, S. Vijaya Kumar, cultural enthusiast and co-founder of India Pride, said the return of these three artefacts marks the conclusion of a process that should have happened many years ago.

More than a decade has passed since the National Gallery of Australia's independent provenance review by former High Court Justice Susan Crennan AC identified significant shortcomings in the provenance of these objects. The review concluded that the ownership histories of two idols did not establish lawful export from India.

The Bhadrakali Trident was acquired from Temple Gallery, New York, with a provenance tracing ownership only to Dr. P.S. Rao, Chennai, before entering the gallery in 1993. Justice Crennan concluded that this ownership history did not establish that the object had been legally exported. It has now been identified as originating from Sri Kasi Viswanatha Swamy Temple, Kollumangudi, Tiruvarur district.

The Stone Nandi was purchased from Carlton Rochell Asian Art based on an elaborate provenance claiming that Mexican diplomat Mario Calderon had assembled the sculpture in Goa before it passed through inheritance to Pedro Silva Villasenor in Mexico. The Crennan Review found that this ownership chain was not convincingly corroborated, and subsequent investigation identified the sculpture as originating from the temple in Tamil Nadu.

The Karthikeya (Shanmukha) followed a provenance similar to the Bhadrakali Trident, again relying upon ownership through Dr. P.S. Rao and Temple Gallery. Justice Crennan's review concluded that there was insufficient evidence to establish a lawful export from India. It has now been identified as originating from Naganathaswamy Temple, Manambadi, Thanjavur.

GS 2 : HEALTH
THE HINDU PAGE: 07

Study to contain antimicrobial resistant neonatal sepsis begins in India

Ramya Kannan
CHENNAI

Striking at the heart of antimicrobial resistance, the international NeoSep 1 trial to evaluate life-saving antibiotic combinations for newborns with sepsis has expanded to India, with the first baby being recruited at the Jawaharlal Postgraduate Education Institute of Medical and Research (JIPMER) in Puducherry.

This was followed by recruiting an infant for the study in Pt. B.D. Sharma PGIMS in Rohtak. The next on the list is Lokmanya Tilak Municipal College and General Hospital, Mumbai. Globally, the study, sponsored by the GARDP Foundation in collaboration with the UCL Innovative Clinical Trials Unit; City St George's, University of London (SGUL), and Penta Foundation, is also underway in Vietnam and Pakistan, and will soon start in Malaysia, Bangladesh and Uganda.

According to a GARDP statement, NeoSep1 aims to enrol 3,000 newborns across Asia and Africa by the end of 2028. Earlier, newborns were enrolled in Ghana, Kenya and South Africa.

Addressing a big issue: Neonatal sepsis is a life-threatening bloodstream infection that occurs in babies under 90 days old, often affecting premature or low-birth-weight infants. AP

Life-threatening infection

Neonatal sepsis is a life-threatening bloodstream infection that occurs in babies under 90 days old, often affecting premature or low-birth-weight infants. It is categorised into early-onset (occurring within the first 72 hours of life) and late-onset (occurring up to 28-90 days), according to a book on neonatal sepsis, authored by Meenakshi Singh.

"With underdeveloped immune systems, newborns are especially prone to life-threatening sepsis," Sally Ellis, Children's Antibiotics Project Leader for GARDP, told *The Hindu*, explaining the significance the NeoSep1 has in the context of growing antimicrobial resistance.

"Today, we stand at a tipping point. The antibiotics for newborns that we have relied on for decades are failing against resistant infections, in many hospital settings. This trial, led by GARDP and partners, is about giving neonatologists new tools, and giving babies with sepsis a fighting chance at life," she adds.

Sepsis is the second most common cause of neonatal mortality, globally responsible for over one million deaths annually. In India, neonatal sepsis remains a leading cause of neonatal mortality, contributing to approximately 30%-40% of all neonatal deaths despite advances in neonatal care, argues a recent paper 'Neonatal Sepsis in India: Epidemiology, Risk Factors and Preventive Strategies from a Public Health Perspective' in the *Journal of Clinical Neonatology*.

The author Ahmed Abdulaziz Almohammadi, writes "In India, neonatal sepsis accounts for an estimated 30%-40% of all neonatal deaths, translating to approximately 2,00,000-2,50,000 preventable deaths annually. Despite substantial reductions in under-five mortality over the past two decades, progress in reducing neonatal mortality has lagged, with sepsis representing a persistent and largely preventable cause of death."

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>
> **SALLY ELLIS**
> Children's Antibiotics Project Leader for GARDP

Divergence from global trends

It turns out that causative agents in India show a divergence from global trends. Dr. Almohammadi notes that the microbiological profile of neonatal sepsis in India differs substantially from that of high-income countries, with gram-negative organisms predominating in most Indian studies. *Klebsiella pneumoniae, Escherichia coli,* Acinetobacter species and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* constitute the majority of bacterial isolates, often demonstrating multidrug resistance. Group B Streptococcus (GBS), which is the leading cause of neonatal sepsis in developed countries, accounts for only 2%-5% of cases in India.

This makes the NeoSep 1 critical – to evaluate and produce a profile that is India specific, addressing the circumstances that can contribute to, or ameliorate the condition in India. It is pioneering the use of a Personalised Randomised Controlled Trial (PRACTical) design, which will evaluate and rank multiple antibiotic regimens for newborns with sepsis. This approach will help clinicians choose effective treatments best suited to their local context, GARDP spokespersons say.

The goal of the trial is to identify one or more safe, effective, and affordable treatments that can reduce the high number of newborn deaths caused by drug-resistant sepsis, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Part 1 of the NeoSep1 trial, conducted in South Africa and Kenya in 2023, assessed and validated the appropriate dose for fosfomycin and flomoxef for use in newborns, in combination with other antibiotics.

Nishad Plakkal, Principal Investigator of the NeoSep1 trial in India and Head of the Department of Neonatology at JIPMER, explains:"the study is a pragmatic trial and allows clinicians to make the diagnosis of sepsis as they normally would. However, to ensure the inclusion of infants with a high probability of infection, we use a sepsis severity score that we derived from an earlier global observational study (NeoOBS). Our microbiology team cultures the baby's blood (and sometimes spinal fluid) to help identify the organism causing sepsis, typically within a day or two. They also identify antibiotic-resistant infections."

Dr. Plakkal explains that the primary outcome, or the main question the study is designed to answer, is death within 28 days; while secondary outcomes will include death within 90 days, need for additional antibiotics, length of hospital stay, and re-admission.

(ramya.kannan@thehindu.co.in)

GS 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE THE HINDU PAGE: 10

Why is the Centre revising the NFSA?

Why has the Centre proposed changing AAY foodgrain entitlements? How will the proposed amendment affect households? Why are Tamil Nadu and Kerala opposing? Could the amendment widen regional disparities in foodgrain allocation?

EXPLAINER

T. Ramakrishnan

The story so far:

On July 6, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay urged the Centre to retain the present provision of 35 kg of foodgrains per household per month under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) meant for the poorest of the poor, and not to make it a per capita system. The next day, the CPI(M) Polit Bureau voiced its concern and demanded that the proposed amendment to the entitlement criteria be dropped. About 10 days ago, immediately after the Union government made public its plan to amend the National Food Security Act (NFSA), Kerala's Food Minister Anoop Jacob expressed reservations over the move.

What is the amendment mooted?

On June 24, the Union Food and Public Distribution (F&PD) Department, while publishing a draft amendment Bill to the NFSA, said every person belonging to AAY households would be entitled to seven kg of foodgrains per month, subject to a maximum of 35 kg per household per month. At present, the entitlement is for the entire household with a ceiling of 35 kg per month. The proposed amendment covers the first proviso to sub-section (1) of Section 3 (Right to receive foodgrains at subsidised prices by persons belonging to eligible households) of the Act. The public can comment on the amendments till July 13 and send their views by email to suneel.sachdeva@nic.in and saurabhomar.edu@gov.in.

Why is the change being proposed?

The existing household-based entitlement, though intended as a protective measure for the most vulnerable families, results in significant inequities depending upon the size of the household, according to the F&PD Department. Smaller households receive a higher per-capita entitlement, whereas larger households receive a lower per-capita entitlement, which may fall below the entitlement available to priority households.

The aim and purpose are to remove intra-category inequities, provide for more rational foodgrain allocation, and better align entitlements with nutritional requirements, a note prepared by the department said.

However, the proposed amendment does not seek to address the inclusion of ineligible persons as beneficiaries, a problem that persists at the State level.

What is the story behind the two southern States' opposition?

It is not for the first time that the two States are articulating their opposition to matters concerning the food policy, as their contemporary political history has an important ingredient – the politics of food. Kerala, which has a long history of the public distribution system (PDS) dating back to the now-abolished princely State of Travancore, introduced informal food distribution mechanisms to mitigate the food shortage of the poor and vulnerable, and was perhaps the first to launch a formal PDS in 1962, three years before the establishment of the Food Corporation of India (FCI). At least on two occasions – 1952 and 1967 – Tamil Nadu saw political upsets, the incumbent regime getting reduced to a minority in 1952 and being shown the door (in 1967). The reason was that the governments of the periods in question were not being swift in handling the rice shortage. Since 1967, successive Chief Ministers of the State have been cautious in taking decisions with regard to the subject of rice.

It was no wonder that the two States were vociferous in their stand in the run-up to the formulation of the NFSA. Though the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) took charge in 2011 in Kerala, the government did not agree to the implementation of the 2013 law – an Act of Parliament – despite the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance regime at the Centre pushing the legislation. The main reservation it had was that the NFSA would lead to the removal of a "large number of poor families" from the list of beneficiaries and put an "enormous financial burden" on the State. However, the then Chief Minister, Oommen Chandy, at one point in time, committed himself to the enforcement of the law in his State, though it was left to his successor, Pinarayi Vijayan, to take the formal decision.

In Tamil Nadu, Jayalalithaa, as Chief Minister, virulently opposed the law because immediately after she came to power in May 2011, her government started the distribution of rice, free to all the ration cardholders, regardless of their economic status. She had criticised the government for stating that those who would be left out of the NFSA would not be eligible to receive free rice. Eventually, she extracted a major concession from the Union government that the existing allocations, as they stood in 2013, for all the States would be legally safeguarded.

Hence, it was no surprise that the two southern neighbours joined the rest of the country in November 2016 in implementing the law.

'The existing household-based entitlement, though intended as a protective measure for the most vulnerable families, results in significant inequities depending upon the size of the household'

Why are Tamil Nadu and Kerala opposing the amendment to NFSA?

Explaining how Kerala would be affected by the latest move, Mr. Jacob has pointed out that States such as his, characterised by nuclear families, will be at a disadvantage as there will be a reduction in the quantity of free foodgrains for families with fewer than five members. He has recalled that even in 2013, when the law took effect, his State took the stand that the AAY cardholders deserved "special consideration," a position that it continues. "As a consumption State, any cut in Kerala's allocation is a matter of concern," Mr. Jacob stated.

Mr. Vijay, who referred in his letter to Mr. Modi about how the amendment would cause a fall in the monthly allocation of foodgrains from 65,261 tonnes to 42,040 tonnes, stated that the number of AAY cardholders below the family size of five members is 15.75 lakh (out of a total of 18.64 lakhs), covering 58.51 lakh beneficiaries (total: 69.27 lakhs). "Rice provided to the AAY cardholders is a staple ingredient of all three meals of the day and cannot be substituted with any other commodity from the open market, resulting in substantial out of pocket expenses," he said.

Besides, Anuradha Talwar, a functionary of the Right to Food Campaign, said that the amendment would bring a "North-South divide" in foodgrain allocation, as families in northern States would get higher allocations as their average family size was bigger than that of the southern States.

What is the way forward?

Ideally, such a change should have been subjected to greater public scrutiny to arrive at a consensus. However, T. Sadagopan, president, Tamil Nadu Progressive Consumer Centre and veteran activist who served on the State government's panels on food, suggests that the Centre chalk out a middle path by making the allocation of 30 kg per family, irrespective of family members. This would help the Union government to cut down its subsidy bill.

Grains of debate

The Centre's proposed amendment to the National Food Security Act has triggered concerns that foodgrain allocations under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana could fall for many households in the southern States

Fine balance: The aim and purpose of the amendment are to remove intra-category inequities, provide for more rational foodgrain allocation, and better align entitlements with nutritional requirements. M. SRINATH

Table 1: AAY coverage, beneficiaries and foodgrain allocation

State	Ceiling of AAY households (lakhs)	AAY coverage: No. of AAY households (in lakh)	AAY coverage: No. of persons (in lakh)	Allocation of foodgrains** for 2026-27 (in tonnes)
Andhra Pradesh	9.09	8.48	22.48	3,81,557
Karnataka	12	10.3	42.72	4,60,740
Kerala	5.96	5.93	18.53	2,50,236
Tamil Nadu	18.65	18.57	62.21	7,82,771
Telangana	6.49	5.64	15.66	2,38,074
Puducherry* (U.T.)	0.32	0.24	0.77	0*
Share of the South	52.51	49.16	162.37	21,13,378
All India	250	217.01	777.41	99,33,042

Source: Foodgrain bulletin for May 2026, Department of Food and Public Distribution, Government of India

*As Puducherry follows the concept of direct benefit transfer, no allocation has been made.

** foodgrains - rice, wheat and coarse grains

Table 2: Off-take and distribution in the Southern States

How the South fared during the current financial year up to the month of May 2026 (tonnes)

State	Allocation	Off take (drawal)	Distributed
Andhra Pradesh	63,593	63,593	57,837
Karnataka	76,790	57,316	35,003
Kerala	41,706	39,812	20,458
Tamil Nadu	1,30,462	1,90,135	1,21,709
Telangana	39,679	59,519	38,893
Share of the South	3,52,230	4,10,375	2,73,900
All India	16,55,505	17,24,185	13,75,621

THE GIST

- The Centre has proposed amending the NFSA to change AAY foodgrain entitlements from a household-based system to a per capita allocation of 7 kg per person, subject to a maximum of 35 kg per household, to address inequities in the existing system.
- Tamil Nadu and Kerala have opposed the proposal, arguing that it will reduce foodgrain allocations for households with fewer than five members and increase the burden on poor families, particularly in States with predominantly nuclear families.
- While the Centre says the amendment will make foodgrain distribution more equitable, critics warn it could widen regional disparities, and some have suggested a middle path of a fixed 30 kg allocation per household.

GS 3 : ECONOMY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 10

Lost in India's celebrations of trade pacts, the big deal

Surjit S Bhalla

IN CASABLANCA, Humphrey Bogart observes that the problems of "three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world". Trade policy is not cinema, but the line applies with some precision to India's current diplomatic enthusiasm for free trade agreements. Its recent trade deals with the EU and the UK and an earlier one with Japan have been widely celebrated, underlining the openness to global commerce. The celebrations are not entirely misplaced. But the arithmetic suggests India may be cheering for the hill of beans while the mountain stands unclimbed.

The mountain is the United States. For the period 2020-25, India's annual goods trade surplus with America averaged approximately $42 billion. India's combined goods trade surplus with the EU, the UK, and Japan together was approximately $12 billion. The ratio is roughly 4 to 1 in favour of the US. One country, no trade agreement, nearly four times the commercial benefit of three large partners and three "celebrated" trade deals. This is the number that should be at the centre of India's trade strategy conversation. It is emphatically not.

The US surplus is not an accident. It reflects India's genuine comparative advantages in pharma generics, software-adjacent electronics assembly, and skilled labour-intensive goods. An India-US FTA that zeroes remaining tariffs on these categories would cement demand for Indian exports. A full deal cuts both ways too, opening India's market wider to American agriculture, energy, and defence goods, so the $42 billion surplus will not simply hold. But even a partial narrowing of it would dwarf anything on offer from the EU, UK, or Japan deals combined. And the bigger prize is not goods at all: It is market access for Indian IT and professional services — a services negotiation, not a merchandise one.

These numbers cover only merchandise goods trade. India exports $79 billion in goods to the US annually and imports $37 billion, generating the $42 billion surplus. These are not raw commodities but generic pharmaceuticals (India supplies roughly 40 per cent of US generic drug volumes), electronics including Apple's iPhone assemblies now made in India, gems and jewellery, engineering goods, and chemicals. The US is India's most important destination for high-value, knowledge-intensive manufactured exports.

The EU is India's second-largest goods trading partner. The country runs a surplus of around $18 billion annually with the bloc — real and growing, driven partly by petroleum re-exports after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and partly by pharmaceuticals and engineering goods. The EU-India FTA matters: India pays 9-12 per cent tariffs on textiles and garments entering Europe, while Vietnam, which signed an EU deal in 2020, pays nothing — a legitimate grievance and real opportunity. But even a generous estimate of what the EU FTA adds to India's goods balance — perhaps $8-10 billion annually at full implementation — leaves the US surplus in a categorically different league.

> For the period 2020-25, India's annual goods trade surplus with America averaged approximately $42 billion. India's combined goods trade surplus with the EU, the UK, and Japan together was approximately $12 billion

The UK deal is the one furthest along: India and the UK signed the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) in July 2025. It delivers duty-free access for 99 per cent of India's exports to the UK by value — but India's current goods surplus with the UK is only around $5 billion, a rounding error next to the American number.

The Japan story is more cautionary. India and Japan signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2011, with a trade target of $25 billion by 2014. India's goods exports to Japan today — 15 years on — are approximately $6 billion, and the trade balance has swung from a small deficit at signing to a deficit of roughly $11 billion now. The CEPA removed most tariffs; what it could not remove were Japan's formidable non-tariff barriers. At the July 2026 Modi-Takaichi summit, the two sides agreed only to review and negotiate a CEPA upgrade — a commitment to talk, not a negotiated reduction in non-tariff barriers.

There is also the China question, which none of these deals addresses but which no serious discussion of Indian trade policy can ignore. India's goods trade deficit with China reached approximately $99 billion in 2024-25 — a record, on imports of $113 billion against exports of just $14 billion. The combined surplus from all three of India's agreements with EU, UK and Japan would not cover an eighth of that deficit.

Which brings us back to the United States. The India-US goods relationship has strengthened every decade since 2000 — a surplus of roughly $7 billion in the 2000s, $22 billion in the 2010s, $42 billion now — without a single formal trade agreement, a sign of how much more could be achieved with one. An India-US agreement covering goods and services — with stable, near-zero tariffs across pharmaceuticals, electronics, gems, and engineering goods, plus provisions on IT services and professional mobility — would be the most consequential trade agreement India has ever signed, serving its broader ambitions: An economy more reliant on markets than bureaucrats, on the growth path Viksit Bharat requires. In India's trade policy universe, the US relationship is not one deal among several. It is the deal. The others are useful increments, this one a structural shift.

Given this, it's worth asking why the US deal is so difficult to achieve. Political economy supplies part of the answer: The likely losers are inefficient Indian producers who currently enjoy protection, and China, since deeper US-India integration would reinforce the global shift away from Chinese manufacturing dominance.

In the end, Bogart gave up the hill of beans and chose the larger cause. India's trade negotiators face a version of the same choice: Keep celebrating agreements that improve the margin, or muster the political will for the one that changes the game. The arithmetic has been clear for some time. The question is whether the strategy has caught up with it.

The writer is chairperson of the Technical Expert Group for the first official Household Income Survey for India. Views are personal

GS 1 : SOCIETY
INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 11

ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

Cities provide more opportunities for women to work. Why can so few women access them?

Not till cities reduce time, safety, care costs

KANIKA MAHAJAN

THE LATEST PLFS city estimates from the National Statistics Office seem to offer a hopeful story: India's largest cities provide women with better jobs. In the 46 million-plus cities, 65.1 per cent of employed women are in regular salaried work, compared with 50.9 per cent in urban India overall. Yet female labour force participation in these cities is only 25.5 per cent, lower than the urban average of 27.7 per cent. Big cities produce better jobs, but the real question is why so few women can access them.

It should not surprise us that big cities have a higher share of salaried jobs. This is the equilibrium outcome of thicker labour markets. Large cities concentrate firms and utilities such as schools, hospitals and business services, along with more educated workers. Among women, 29.4 per cent in these cities have college-and-above education against 25 per cent in non-metro urban India. Once firms and skilled workers cluster together, more salaried work follows.

Nor is it surprising that employed women in big cities are concentrated in salaried jobs. Women place high value on non-wage attributes such as predictable hours, formal contracts, paid leave, safety, childcare and transport. Research shows that women's participation rises with the expansion of white-collar work, which offers higher returns and social acceptability. Our research similarly finds that larger firms employ more women, likely because they offer amenities like maternity benefits, transport and paid leave.

The salaried-work statistic must therefore be read carefully, since it is conditional on being employed. It tells us only that among the minority of urban women who make it into paid work, many select into better jobs. It does not mean the city has solved women's employment problems. A city where three-fourths of women remain outside the labour force cannot declare success because the one-fourth who work are more likely to be salaried.

The same caution is needed in reading the earnings numbers. On average, women earn 22.7 per cent less than men, an important disparity, but monthly earnings do not account for hours worked. The PLFS data show that women employed in salaried work work almost 12.6 per cent fewer hours per week than men. In bigger urban cities, this hour gap is slightly larger, at around 14 per cent. A simple accounting exercise shows that fewer hours explain almost 20 per cent of the earnings gap. Adding age, education and occupation raises the explained share to just 30 per cent. The larger point remains that a sizeable earnings penalty for women persists irrespective of city size, pointing to a more general problem of gender discrimination.

The harder question is why female participation is lower in the largest cities than in urban India as a whole. One answer lies in the geography of work, since women's employment is not just a wage decision. Evidence from job-search behaviour shows that women search closer to home and are willing to trade off wages for shorter commutes. Indian evidence on urban mobility points the same way. Women are far less likely than men to step out of the home on a given day, reflecting safety, household responsibility, social norms and weak transport systems. Fewer hours worked reflect similar constraints of care, commuting and safety.

This helps explain why rural India has historically shown higher female work participation. Much rural work is low-paid and informal, but agriculture and allied work is often closer to home and easier to combine with domestic responsibilities. As work moves from farms to firms, non-agricultural growth can exclude women in the absence of safe transport, affordable childcare and quality jobs.

The unemployment data also tell the same story. Female unemployment (ages 15-59) is higher than male unemployment everywhere, but the gender gap is larger in the 46 big cities, at 9.81 per cent for women against 6.49 per cent for men, versus 9.07 and 6.36 per cent elsewhere. Big cities are not merely places where women opt out. They are also places where women looking for work face a harder matching problem.

India's urban agenda cannot treat women's employment as an automatic by-product of growth. Cities need frequent and safe public transport, last-mile connectivity, street lighting, mixed-use neighbourhoods, childcare and regulations that make amenities easier for employers to provide. The real lesson from the new data is that even our best labour markets do not work for women. Until cities reduce the time, safety and care costs of taking a job, they will continue to produce better jobs without producing enough women workers.

The writer is associate professor of Economics at Ashoka University and Co-Lead for Employment at the Isaac Centre for Public Policy

Beyond childcare, four other barriers

ROOPA KUDVA

THERE ARE two things worth cheering about in the latest report of the National Statistics Office on India's million-plus cities. First, female labour force participation has climbed from 19.8 per cent in 2017-18 to 27.2 per cent in 2025, showing the sharpest gain of any group. The second is entrepreneurship — in 32 of the 46 million-plus cities, more than 20 per cent of unincorporated establishments are now run by women. Cities have become India's biggest centres of opportunity for women — and increasingly, it isn't only the big metros. In Surat, Vadodara and Pune, 40 per cent of unincorporated establishments are run by women.

Both numbers deserve celebration, but they come with a catch. Female LFPR, even after this gain, is still barely a third of the male rate of 75.9 per cent. Startlingly, despite the shift in aspirations, nearly 70 per cent of women outside the labour force still cite childcare and home commitments as the reason, proof that this is far from a solved problem.

For the rest, however, four gaps explain why the LFPR gap is not closing faster. Every system that touches a woman's working life — how she gets to work, whether she can occupy public space with the same ease as men, whether she rises once she's in an organisation, whether a bank or an investor will fund her — is designed around a male default.

Mobility: For men, the labour market begins at the workplace. For many women, it begins much earlier — on the street, at the bus stop, at the train station. ORF's Women on the Move study found that over half of women reported experiencing harassment on public transport, and a similar share perceive it as unsafe. Women also rarely have linear commutes — their journeys are "chained", dropping children to school, managing errands, on the way to or back from work — while our transport systems are still built around a simple home-to-office trip. If transport isn't reliable, safe or built for how women actually move through a city, labour supply shrinks before an employer ever sees the candidate.

Public spaces: The deeper problem is beyond the commute. Look at our public spaces — you rarely see women simply sitting in a park alone, lingering in a café, or spending time on a street without a clear purpose. Women feel they must be doing something legitimate to justify their presence in public space. That's a very different problem from safety alone, and it's one policing can't fix. The answer is designing cities that assume women are full participants in public life — not those who need a reason to be there.

Career progression: Even women who clear the first two hurdles run into a third: They don't rise at the rate they enter. Only 5 per cent of NSE-500 companies are women-led. For years, the explanation has been maternity breaks and caregiving. That narrative is tired and incomplete — it explains some exits, but not why so many women who stay still don't progress into leadership.

A large part of the answer is unconscious bias. Successful women are often less liked than successful men, because traits like assertiveness and driving accountability conflict with longstanding expectations that women be accommodating and nurturing. A firm view from a man reads as conviction; from a woman, as sharp. Women are asked to deliver outcomes while continuously managing tone and perception — and that shapes self-belief and choices, sometimes unconsciously. That is why, as one report showed, men apply for roles when they meet 60 per cent of the qualifications, while women wait until they meet nearly all of them.

This is where the conversation usually runs into a familiar objection — that supporting women somehow means compromising merit. Far from it. Promoting women isn't anti-merit; it's how you actually give yourself the chance to uncover more of it. Organisations that effectively exclude half the workforce aren't protecting standards. They're narrowing them.

Funding: The fourth gap is capital. Women-led MSMEs in India face a credit gap of around 35 per cent, held back by inadequate collateral, lower property ownership and financial literacy. Further up the ladder: Less than 5 per cent of India's VC funding goes to start-ups with a woman founder. Part of the reason is pitch-room dynamics. Studies have shown that investors ask women founders more "prevention" questions — about risk, safety, what could go wrong — while men are asked "promotion" questions, about growth and scale.

Cities have opened a door for women that didn't exist a decade ago. But walking through it still means clearing a commute, a public square, a boardroom and a bank. Until all four are rebuilt for her, closing the gap with men will take far longer than it needs to.

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