

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

24-09-2026

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Quality control and India's manufacturing growth

India needs firms that can grow, integrate into global value chains and compete internationally. To make this happen, the Quality Control Order (QCO) reassessment exercise needs to move forward.

Concerns over India's QCOs and other non-tariff barriers also surfaced during the WTO's eighth Trade Policy Review of India, held in July 2026, and were raised not only by major trading partners such as the European Union and the United States, but also by fellow BRICS members, including Brazil, China and Indonesia.

The number of products covered under QCOs expanded rapidly after 2019, from 88 products in 2019 to 765 by the end of December 2024. However, the pace of expansion slowed considerably towards the end of 2025. This was driven by an important shift in the government's approach, with several QCOs being revoked or suspended, particularly those covering intermediate goods, as mandatory certification had raised concerns about input availability, costs and potential supply-chain disruptions.

The government's new order

Recently, the government introduced the Transition Facilitation (Quality Control) Order, 2026, notified by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) on June 25, 2026. The order seeks to ease regulatory bottlenecks by allowing eligible firms facing difficulties in obtaining BIS Scheme-I certification to source products temporarily from BIS Scheme-II-licensed suppliers in specified sectors, including toys, footwear and air conditioners. Access to this transition mechanism is subject to prescribed eligibility criteria and approval by a committee constituted by the DPIIT.

These developments are welcome steps towards reducing the risk that quality regulations inadvertently disrupt supply chains or constrain



Prerna Prabhakar

Fellow at Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)



Nancy Gupta

Visiting Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy

domestic manufacturing. More than 600 QCO-covered products remain to be reassessed, including several critical intermediate inputs used across key manufacturing sectors such as chemicals, steel, textiles, machinery and electronics, and rubber and plastics.

Existing regulations can place a disproportionate burden on smaller industrial players, both by constraining their access to critical inputs and by imposing relatively high compliance costs. Given the extensive downstream linkages of these inputs, the next phase of QCO rationalisation should focus particularly on regulations affecting intermediate goods and assess their implications not only for product quality but also for input availability, costs, competitiveness and domestic value addition.

Findings of a recent study

In this regard, a recent CSEP study examined this question in detail for firms that use chemicals. Chemicals are critical intermediate inputs for downstream sectors such as rubber and plastics, pharmaceuticals and electronics, among others. The first QCO for a chemical product was introduced in 2018, and the number of chemical products covered rose to 52 by 2024. Consequently, the share of chemical-using firms exposed to regulation on the input side rose from 11.8% in 2019 to 56.6% in 2024.

When examining the impact of QCOs on chemicals on downstream user industries, the study finds that the effects vary considerably by firm size. Among larger firms, input QCOs are associated with a 9.6% increase in production alongside a sharp 37% decline in gross value added (GVA). This suggests that while larger firms can sustain and even expand output, this comes at the cost of lower value addition, potentially reflecting higher input costs and their ability to

pass on at least part of these costs through higher output prices.

For smaller firms, input QCOs have no statistically significant effect on production or GVA but are associated with a steep 47.6% decline in profitability. This points to their more limited ability to absorb rising input costs and bear the additional compliance costs associated with QCOs.

The empirical evidence makes it clear that the adverse effects of QCOs on key inputs are not confined to smaller downstream firms. Even larger firms, which are better placed to absorb regulatory and input-cost shocks and are often able to sustain production, can experience significant declines in value addition. Supply-chain implications should therefore become an integral part of both the design of new QCOs and the reassessment of existing ones. Finally, the disproportionate burden on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) requires specific policy attention. Smaller firms need dedicated assistance to meet certification and compliance requirements, alongside appropriately designed exemptions or transition periods where compliance costs are particularly burdensome.

Quality standards, greater scale

As India works towards the ambition of Viksit Bharat 2047, achieving greater scale in manufacturing will be critical. Quality standards have an important role to play in that journey, but their success should ultimately be judged not by the number of products brought under mandatory regulation, but by whether they improve quality without constraining the scale, efficiency and competitiveness of Indian manufacturing.

The views expressed are personal

India's Quality Control Order (QCO) reset must go further in a changing global trade order

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THE HINDU PAGE: 8

India and the plausible multilateralism of BRICS

BRICS gatherings always trigger heated debates in India. The primary reason is the importance that the strategic and policymaking community, comprising both optimists and sceptics, attaches to this platform, of which India is an integral pillar. While optimists argue that BRICS could function as an institution capable of multipolarising the global order, or expediting that transition, sceptics highlight the grouping's internal divisions and worry about its possible domination by Russia and China. A third group writes off BRICS altogether, dismissing it as little more than an annual gathering that generates strategic noise. They argue that India should be wary of close association with the grouping and instead focus on preserving and expanding its partnership with the United States, which, in their view, is the only viable path to India's rise.

The 18th BRICS summit, held in New Delhi on September 12-13, 2026, attracted greater national and global attention because of its timing and location. It was the first BRICS annual summit since the U.S. and Israel launched their unprovoked war against Iran, in India's extended neighbourhood, on February 28, 2026. The summit, which brought together the Presidents of Iran, Russia and China, among other leaders, was hosted by India, a close strategic partner of the U.S. and Israel.

Consensus in Delhi

Despite its internal contradictions and the broader chaos enveloping international politics, the summit can be seen as a success on multiple levels. That New Delhi could forge a consensus among the 11 member-countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran, which are involved in an undeclared conflict, was itself an achievement. The Delhi Declaration shows that, despite their differences and even disputes, member-countries continue to find value in supporting a BRICS worldview rooted in the pursuit of a more representative global order.

The consensus was reached through compromises by all parties. Consider India's position. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in Israel just two days before Israel and the U.S. started bombing Iran. India initially refrained from condemning the attacks or the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This created an impression that New Delhi was siding with the U.S. and Israel. India also watched from the sidelines as Pakistan seized on the diplomatic opening created by the war and stepped in as a mediator between the U.S. and Iran. But India quickly repositioned itself as a traditional balancer in West Asia.

Multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS provided New Delhi with space to restore that balancing posture without causing strategic damage to its bilateral relationships. India strongly endorsed the Bishkek resolution of the SCO in September, condemning the strikes on Iran and expressing condolences to the country



Varghese
K. George



Stanley Johny

The very structure of BRICS offers India space to pursue strategic autonomy amid intensifying great-power rivalries

over the killing of Khamenei. It also hosted Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian for the Delhi BRICS summit, even as the war in West Asia grinds on. The image of Mr. Modi walking hand in hand with Mr. Pezeshkian is unlikely to fade any time soon in Washington or Tel Aviv.

Second, while there is no immediate resolution to the border problems with China, which continue to simmer, there is momentum in efforts to reset ties. Multilateral forums such as BRICS provide a platform for India and China to remain engaged even when high-level bilateral visits are not taking place. Their differences are not going to disappear; they have to learn to manage their troubled relationship. History suggests that a lack of engagement between competing major powers can only deepen mistrust, while deepening mistrust, combined with the security dilemma stemming from their competition, could have dangerous consequences. So, it is important for India and China to stay engaged, bilaterally and multilaterally, creating guardrails for competitive coexistence.

Third, on all the major global issues of the present – artificial intelligence regulation, the rules governing global trade and finance, climate change, border conflicts, and the role and status of multilateral bodies – BRICS members may have different approaches and priorities, but they converge on the point that unilateralism by any bloc or power is detrimental to their interests and to the planet.

The Washington predictability

The context in which the Delhi summit was held is also crucial. The total predictability of the U.S. approach – rather than the unpredictability that some commentators labour to establish – towards the rest of the world is that it does not care much about anything other than its own dominance. Several BRICS members have had their own difficult experiences with the U.S., and they are trying to chart their own paths forward. India, a few months ago, was slapped with varying tariffs by Washington. India was also one of the countries most affected economically by the U.S.-Israel war on Iran. On September 16, the U.S. House passed the Russia sanctions Bill, seeking to impose tariffs of up to 100% on countries including India.

India's foreign policy under Mr. Modi has been interpreted by a section of the strategic commentariat as an evident tilt towards the U.S. camp. Statements by Mr. Modi himself in the early years of his premiership that India had overcome its "hesitation of history" in ties with Washington gave further impetus to this view, though there has also been the parallel official formulation of 'sabke sath' foreign policy, or multi-alignment. India has always had a more complex view of history. And even if it has overcome its "hesitation of history", it has not abandoned the hesitations of its strategic realism.

When India looks back at history and looks around the world today, it sees that countries that

become frontiers in great-power rivalries often pay a huge price. If Pakistan's story is not instructive enough, there are two live battlefronts that illustrate this every day – the UAE and Ukraine.

The UAE and Iran would have been better off dealing with each other than facing the situation in which they currently find themselves. The UAE-Iran bilateral meeting on the sidelines of BRICS in Delhi marks an acknowledgment of this lesson and a quest to use multilateral platforms to address bilateral challenges. Ukraine, which, backed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has been fighting Russia for more than four years, does not have any such platform to maintain direct contact with Moscow – which leaves Kyiv's diplomatic options totally dependent on the whims and wishes of Brussels and Washington.

India's learning

This is not to argue that India should downgrade its relations with the U.S. The strategic partnership with Washington is extremely important for India's progress and development, but what India must not allow itself to become, at any cost, is a frontline in the U.S.-China competition. BRICS enables India to pursue that path without having to champion an anti-U.S. agenda or undermine its cooperation with Washington. The U.S., which had come to terms with India's firm adherence to strategic autonomy, has recently been pushing the envelope to draw New Delhi into a more subordinate relationship. For Washington, this is an ongoing theme. But India should pursue multiple pathways to its rise rather than succumb to the temptations of unequal great-power alliances.

While it is true that there are serious internal divisions among BRICS members, there is also a larger reality of external convergence of interests among them. BRICS is not an organisation like the G-7, where American primacy and the western order are accepted by all member-countries. Nor is it the case that every multilateral or plurilateral grouping is converging on all points.

The divisions within BRICS, to a certain extent, prevent any one country from dominating the grouping, while the external convergence of interests – their shared belief that the post-war international system is unfair and that a more representative order should be built – could hold the group together as it lays the foundations and builds the blocks of a new order. The dialectical relationship between internal contradictions and external convergence could ultimately produce a synthesis, which is increasingly evident in the case of BRICS. The contradictions within are therefore not a reason to question the grouping's existence; they are, in fact, part of the reason why it should exist and flourish.

varghese.g@thehindu.co.in
stanleyjohny@thehindu.co.in

GS 2 & 3: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS and ECONOMY

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Trading smart

India-NZ FTA shows how smaller deals can complement big-bang trade pacts

The India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA), set to come into force on October 20, is a good example of why India is right in simultaneously pushing for trade deals with smaller trade partners along with the major global economies. On the face of it, it would be easy to dismiss the \$1.1 billion of bilateral goods trade between the two countries as being less than 1% of India's total goods trade. A doubling by 2030, as envisaged under the deal, is still a minuscule amount. Yet, trade is not simply a macroeconomic indicator. It is also a source of livelihood for lakhs of businesses, nearly half of which are micro, small, and medium enterprises. These exporters need all the help that they can get in the current trade environment. Adverse developments related to tariffs or the closure of trade routes can be mitigated to an extent by a nimble rerouting of trade to other countries where Indian exporters receive an advantage. With 100% U.S. tariffs looming and a trade deal with Washington remaining elusive, India needs to open up as many alternative channels for its exporters as possible. The New Zealand FTA delivers – India has managed to receive duty-free access on 100% of its exports, a historic concession. India has a good mix of capital- and labour-intensive exports to New Zealand that stand to benefit. Textiles make up about 14% of India's exports, while pearls and semi-precious stones constitute another 5% or so. On the capital-intensive side, one-third of India's exports are pharmaceuticals, parts of nuclear reactors, vehicular parts, mineral fuels, electrical machinery, and iron and steel.

India has also done well in its handling of sensitive sectors. While the opening up of India's dairy sector was a major demand by the New Zealand negotiators, India held firm and excluded it from the deal. In total, nearly 30% of India's import lines have been kept outside the tariff concessions. On labour mobility, India has won some valuable concessions on visas for workers and students. At a time when several western countries are clamping down on foreign worker inflows, such alternative routes provide relief. India has also extracted a commitment from New Zealand to facilitate investments of \$20 billion in India over 15 years, smaller but along the same lines as in the agreement with the EFTA bloc. India needs foreign investment not just for its economic growth but also to manage its balance of payments. This FTA is a good blueprint on how India can use its growing international heft to negotiate overwhelmingly in its favour.

GS 2: GOVERNANCE

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 04

• POLICY

Tulu's 'official' tag in Karnataka: What this means

Akram M

Bengaluru, September 23

THE D K Shivakumar-led Congress government in Karnataka last week decided to accord Tulu the status of second additional administrative language in two districts of coastal Karnataka: Dakshina Kannada and Udupi. The announcement came during a special state Cabinet meeting in Mangaluru.

A Dravidian language

Tulu is classified among the five Dravidian languages, the others being Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. It is spoken mainly in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi in Karnataka, and parts of northern Kerala. The language has a strong oral tradition, rich folklore, and cultural practices like Yakshagana, Bhoota Kola, and others. Although it had its own script, today it is largely written using the Kannada script.

Although there has been migration of the Tulu-speaking population to metros such as Mumbai and Bengaluru, around 1.8 to 2 million people are native speakers.

Behind the demand

The special status for Tulu means government offices in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts can now use the language for official communication alongside Kannada. The state Cabinet also decided to grant Rs 82 lakh every year for translation, training, and activities related to language use to facilitate implementation.

WHO SPEAKS TULU?

- Tulu is spoken mainly in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi in Karnataka, and parts of north Kerala.

- Although a large number of the Tulu-speaking population has migrated to metro cities, around 1.8 to 2 million people are native speakers.

For decades, Tulu-speaking communities have sought recognition for their language from the government. They believed that despite its cultural depth and sizable speaker base, Tulu was not accorded the same status as other regional languages such as Konkani or Kodava.

Over the years, several legislators from coastal Karnataka have raised the demand in the legislature.

Among the key arguments is that Tulu speakers were not granted a separate linguistic state during the reorganisation of states in 1956, as it was done for other Dravidian languages. There has also been a sustained social media campaign by Tulu speakers for recognition.

Challenges in implementation

Official status also allows for including Tulu in education, signage, and cultural promotion. As of now, only a few signs in the region are in Tulu. The primary challenge in implementation is that not many know the Tulu script. Although it has been revived in recent years, the language is not taught in schools and colleges, making it harder for the general populace to read it.

Political significance

For years, coastal Karnataka has been the BJP's bastion and is known for its communally charged politics. Efforts by the Congress to make inroads into the region by consolidating castes have been futile. The decision to hold a Cabinet meeting in Mangaluru to accord Tulu the special status is seen as an attempt to reach out to voters by appealing to their cultural heritage and practices.

GS 2: POLITY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 04

• LEGAL

EC appointment: Why SC placed matter before CJI



AMAAAL SHEIKH

A TWO-JUDGE bench of the Supreme Court on Wednesday referred petitions challenging the 2023 law on the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other Election Commissioners (ECs) — which excludes the Chief Justice of India (CJI) from the process — to the CJI to consider forming a Constitution Bench (which has a minimum of five judges).

What the joint order said

While Justices Dipankar Datta and Satish Chandra Sharma were split on referring the matter to a larger bench, they agreed that it should be placed before the CJI. They said sending the issue first to a three-judge bench would be of "little worth" and would only delay a final decision on the important Constitutional questions raised by the case.

The judges flagged the long delays in deciding Constitutional references. They noted that the Anoop Baranwal case (2023) took eight years to reach a final judgment and cited other references that remained pending for years. Calling such delays "a source of institutional embarrassment", they urged the CJI to consider setting up a permanent five-judge bench for Constitutional cases.

The 'Anoop Baranwal' case

The challenge to the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 traces its origins to the Supreme Court's judgment in *Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India* in March 2023. In that ruling, a Constitution Bench had noted that Parliament had not enacted a law governing appointments to the Election Commission despite Article 324 of the Constitution contemplating one. It laid down an interim mechanism under which appointments would be made by a committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India — until Parliament enacts a law.

The bench had underlined the importance of an independent Election Commission and observed that those entrusted with conducting elections must be insu-

• THE 2023 LAW AND THE CHALLENGE IN TOP COURT: A TIMELINE

1950: Article 324(2) of the Constitution is framed. It provides that the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners are appointed by the President, subject to any law Parliament may make on the matter.



SEPTEMBER 2023: A two-judge SC bench delivers a split verdict on petitions challenging the 2023 Act. While Justice Dipankar Datta holds that the challenge could be decided on existing Constitutional principles, Justice Satish Chandra Sharma says it raises substantial and novel Constitutional questions. Both judges issued a joint order referring the matter to the CJI to constitute a Constitution Bench to avoid further procedural delay.

1950-2023: For 73 years, Parliament does not enact any new law on this. Appointments to the Election Commission (EC) are made under the executive framework.

2015: A writ petition is filed under Article 32, challenging the absence of a law governing appointments to the EC.

2018: A two-judge bench refers the matter to a Constitution Bench.

MARCH 2023: Eight years on, a five-judge Constitution Bench delivers its judgment in the 'Anoop Baranwal' case, holding that appointments to the EC should be made by a committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Chief Justice of India until Parliament enacts a law.

lated from executive influence.

Parliament subsequently enacted the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023. But the law replaced the CJI on the selection committee with a Union Cabinet minister nominated by the Prime Minister. The government, therefore, got two representatives on the three-member panel, alongside the Leader of Opposition.

Constitution Bench issue: What Justice Datta said

Justice Datta took the view that the petitions could be decided by the present bench itself. According to him, the top court had already settled the governing Constitutional principle in *Anoop Baranwal*, which held that appointments to the EC cannot remain under "exclusive executive control". The question now, he said, was whether the 2023 law complies with that principle. That exercise was "no more than the application of the settled principles of law to the facts of the case" and did not require a Constitution Bench, he said. Justice Datta, therefore, held that "neither any Constitutional bar nor a precedent precludes hearing of these petitions by the present Bench".

At the same time, Justice Datta expressed concerns about the structure of the selection committee under the 2023 law. Referring to the panel comprising the PM, a Cabinet min-

Split verdict

Justice Datta said the petitions could be decided by the present bench. He said the top court had already settled the governing Constitutional principle in *Anoop Baranwal*.

Justice Sharma said a Constitution Bench should hear the case as the SC is examining the Constitutional validity of the 2023 Act for the first time.

ister nominated by the PM and the Leader of Opposition, he observed that a minister bound by collective responsibility "cannot be expected to defy his own nominator".

Thus, the presence of the Leader of Opposition in the Selection Committee becomes "largely ornamental", he said. He also emphasised the perception test — "It is not enough for the EC to be independent, it must also appear to be independent". On the petitioners' argument that the law gives the executive overwhelming influence over appointments, he said it "does appear to have substance", while stating that these were only *prima facie* observations.

Justice Datta also rejected the government's comparison between the EC selection process and the collegium system for judicial appointments. He said judicial appointments involve the executive at multiple stages and described the popular notion that "judges appoint judges" as a "myth". He raised concerns about the selective implementation of Collegium recommendations and said the absence of a neutral member in the Collegium could not justify the absence of a neutral member in the EC appointment process. He described the comparison drawn by the government as "disingenuous, evasive and disquieting".

Constitution Bench issue: What Justice Sharma said

Justice Sharma disagreed with Justice

The 2023 EC appointment law excludes the Chief Justice of India from the process. A challenge to the law has divided a two-judge bench

Datta and held that the challenge must be referred to a Constitution Bench. He said that the Supreme Court is examining the Constitutional validity of the 2023 Act for the first time. "There is no authoritative decision of this court till date pronouncing on the constitutional validity of the said Act," he said adding, "The decision on these writ petitions would be the first of its kind and it is all the more necessary that a reference is made."

The petitioners, however, had argued that the central legal question that the selection must be an independent process has already been decided by the 2023 Constitution Bench ruling.

For Justice Sharma, the key question was whether Parliament was justified in replacing the CJI with a Cabinet minister nominated by the PM. He said: "Whether or not Parliament was justified in not including a neutral selector in the selection committee" is "an important question arising for the first time before this court". Since this question "has not been dealt with in any precedent", he said, Article 145(3) left "no room for a decision on such question finally by the present combination" of two judges.

He viewed the government's arguments on separation of powers and the comparison with the collegium system as issues that required examination by a larger bench.

What is a Constitution Bench

As per Article 145(3), a Constitution Bench of five or more judges decides a "substantial question of law" involving the interpretation of the Constitution. A case does not go to a larger bench merely because it involves the Constitution. The question must be "unsettled" — that is, one the court has never authoritatively answered before. Constitution Bench rulings also carry greater weight than ordinary judgments.

Split verdicts often trigger referrals. When two judges cannot agree, the matter goes to the Chief Justice, who decides whether to send it to a larger bench. But the split itself does not automatically warrant a Constitution Bench — the court must still be convinced the dispute raises a substantial Constitutional question requiring authoritative determination.

In October 2022, the top court delivered a split verdict in the Karnataka hijab case. The matter was referred to a larger bench and remains pending more than four years later. Earlier this year, another split verdict arose on Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act. That matter, too, went to a larger bench.

GS 2: POLITY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 04

• POLITICS

4 states out of Uttar Pradesh? Politics behind demand to split most populous state

Vikas Pathak

New Delhi, September 23

UTTAR PRADESH minister and Saheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party leader Om Prakash Rajbhar has claimed the state will be divided into four, and that the Purvanchal region will get a "Rajbhar Chief Minister". At a public meeting Sunday, Rajbhar claimed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi told him that the division could happen after the ongoing caste census.

Uttar Pradesh BJP sources brushed it off as pre-poll posturing. "He perhaps wants to energise his cadre by making them believe that he can be Chief Minister and they can also get some posts," said a state BJP insider who did not wish to be named.

But such a demand is not new. During her tenure as chief minister from 2007 to 2012, Mayawati created ripples by backing a division of the state.

How is a state divided?

This is what Article 3 of the Constitution states: "Parliament may by law... form a new State by separation of territory from

any State or by uniting two or more States or parts of States or by uniting any territory to a part of any State... provided that no Bill for the purpose shall be introduced in either House of Parliament except on the recommendation of the President and unless, where the proposal contained in the Bill affects the area, boundaries or name of any of the States, the Bill has been referred by the President to the Legislature of that State for expressing its views thereon within such period as may be specified in the reference or within such further period as the President may allow and the period so specified or allowed has expired."

In simple terms, this means that the President must recommend such a Bill — thus showing the intent of the Centre — and the state Assembly must be consulted and given a finite period to express its views. What is crucial here is that the latter's views are not binding on Parliament. And what is required to alter the boundaries of a state is just a simple majority in both its Houses.

This makes it relatively easy for Parliament to alter boundaries of the state by or-

• The 2011 proposal for dividing UP



ordinary legislation even without the consent of the state's Assembly.

The four new states created since 2000, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Telangana, all saw strong people's movements demanding a separate state. That is not the case in Uttar Pradesh. While

the demand for Bundelkhand has been raised from time to time, even that has cooled down in the past few years.

Why was there a demand for division of Uttar Pradesh?

In November 2011, the Mayawati government moved and passed a resolution in the Assembly proposing to divide the state into Purvanchal, Bundelkhand, Awadh Pradesh and Paschim Pradesh (see map). The state government argued that Uttar Pradesh's vast size made administration and development difficult and that smaller states could lead to better governance.

The resolution was sent to the Centre but was not pursued further by the Samajwadi Party (SP) government that came to power in 2012.

At Mayawati's peak, such a split would have favoured her. All four regions of the state have a sizable Dalit population, between 16% and 28%. The Scheduled Caste population in all of Uttar Pradesh is around 21%. Her Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) could, therefore, have emerged as a force in four states, establishing itself as a national party

in the eyes of voters.

What further worked for Mayawati in 2011 was that the Yadav population in Uttar Pradesh — the core of then arch-rival SP — was not evenly distributed in terms of its political heft. The SP had two major belts — the Etah-Mainpuri-Etawah-Firozabad belt in the west, and the Yadav belt in eastern Uttar Pradesh around Jaunpur, Azamgarh, Ghazipur and Mau. The move could have split the SP's Yadav belts and pushed Muslims into voting for the BSP. However, the BSP declined over time and the proposal died before any of this could happen.

Ajit Singh of the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) had also demanded a "Heart Pradesh" in western Uttar Pradesh. The reason: his party's Jat support base dominates the region; their numbers aren't high outside western Uttar Pradesh.

What about Rajbhar's claim?

While for the reasons mentioned above, the SP would not want UP to be divided, any such idea would not work for Yogi Adityanath as well. Right now, apart from his Hindutva image, what raises Adityanath's

national stature is that he has been Chief Minister of India's most populous state. For that advantage to continue to accrue to him, UP must remain a single state.

For the BJP, too, the fact that it has won Uttar Pradesh consistently — with a dip in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls — has added to its political heft over the years. Because of its size, its centrality to many Hindu cultural symbols and holy sites, and its being the core of the "Hindi heartland", UP has had tremendous political heft in India, even if it has been economically a largely underdeveloped state.

It is often said that the road to Delhi passes through Lucknow. Indeed, absolute majorities of any party — be it the BJP or the Congress before it — at the Centre have always come on the back of strong performances in Uttar Pradesh. No party has ever won a Lok Sabha majority in India on its own after a poor showing in UP, though there have been instances of coalition governments coming to power after a modest showing in the state. Rajbhar's claim, therefore, is not one that the BJP, or even the SP, would want to back.