

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

27-06-2026

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India's eastern borders affected by flow of opium from Myanmar: NCB

Neighbouring country emerges as alternative global opium source after ban on drugs in Afghanistan, says bureau; India's eastern borders through Manipur corridor are the most direct and porous entry point for this expanding production base

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Following the 2022 Taliban-imposed ban on drugs in Afghanistan, Myanmar has emerged as an alternative source of global opium supply and the consequences are already visible along India's eastern borders, through the Manipur corridor, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) said in its 2026 annual report.

The report, released on Friday by Home Minister Amit Shah, highlighted the fact that the northeastern States of Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland are bearing the sharpest frontline exposure due to the enhanced production of drugs in Myanmar.

Porous border

Porous border mechanisms, including the Free Movement Regime (FMR) along the India-Myanmar border, have created conditions under which these States have transitioned from peripheral transit zones to active staging grounds for distribution of narcotics into the Indian hinterland.



Illegal trade: Myanmar's illicit opium cultivation expanded by approximately 56% between 2021 and 2023. AP

Myanmar's illicit opium cultivation expanded by approximately 56% between 2021 and 2023, according to the NCB report, with the area under poppy cultivation reaching 45,200 hectares.

India's eastern borders through the Manipur corridor are the most direct and porous entry point for this expanding production base, the report said.

"Myanmar's Golden Triangle has expanded as both an opiate supplier and a dominant methamphetamine (Yaba tablets) hub. The convergence, primarily in areas controlled by ethnic armed groups in Shan State, has created a poly-drug production. The Manipur corridor, through

which India's National Highway no. 102 passes, is the primary land entry point for both heroin and methamphetamine tablets," it said.

The second major trafficking corridor enters India through Champhai in Mizoram, which shares close proximity with Myanmar's Chin State.

Drugs are smuggled through unfenced and porous stretches of the border and routed towards Silchar in Assam's Barak Valley through Aizawl and adjoining road networks, the report added.

In 2025, Mizoram accounted for 1,477 kg of seized amphetamine-type stimulants, out of total seizures amounting to 3,485

kg across the country. The other States where such recoveries were reported are Manipur (535 kg), Delhi (454 kg), Gujarat (308 kg) and Karnataka (164 kg).

Drone-based trafficking

On the other side of the country, despite the Taliban's 2022 crackdown, which reduced Afghan opium production by 93% from its peak, around 13,200 tonnes of pre-ban narcotics are sustaining the trafficking pipelines and making their way into India through the western border.

The NCB said that drone-based drug trafficking from across the Pakistan border has seen a five-fold increase over the past five years, particularly into Punjab.

In 2025, there were 305 such cases, resulting in the seizure of 468 kg of narcotics, a 96% increase in quantity over 2024. Punjab alone accounted for 298 such cases and 461 kg seized, primarily heroin (449.751 kg) and methamphetamine (9.018 kg). Overall, Punjab accounted for 58% of total seizures, which amounted to 3,567

kg across the country.

"The scale of this threat is underscored by the growth trajectory: from just 3 incidents in 2021, incidents surged to 35 in 2022, 28 in 2023, before accelerating sharply to 178 incidents in 2024 and 305 incidents in 2025, a 100-fold increase in incident count over five years," the report said.

This exponential rise reflects the growing operational maturity of trafficking networks using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to circumvent traditional border controls, the NCB said. Additional incidents were reported in Rajasthan and Jammu and Kashmir.

"The South Asian arm [of the drug trade via Afghanistan] flows through Pakistan into India via both the land frontier in Punjab and Rajasthan, and the maritime frontier along the Gujarat and Maharashtra coastlines, the latter a route of increasing concern given its use of fishing vessels and coastal craft that operate below the detection threshold of standard maritime surveillance," the NCB said.

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India-New Zealand FTA, a modern trade partnership

For years, trade between India and New Zealand has been a relationship with untapped potential. The two economies have remained friendly partners, yet commercial engagement has never quite matched the opportunities available. Trade remains relatively modest. The bilateral merchandise trade stood at \$1.3 billion (approximately) in FY 2024-25, of which India's exports to New Zealand accounted for only around \$711 million, despite registering 32% year-on-year growth. The numbers are moving in the right direction, but remain small when compared to India's trade relationships with larger partners. The proposed India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) could change that equation as it attempts to create conditions for faster bilateral growth.

At first glance, the headlines are easy to focus on – zero-duty access for Indian exports, wider market access for services, and a proposed investment commitment of \$20 billion over the next 15 years. These are important outcomes. The larger story, however, is that the agreement reflects the evolving nature of trade partnerships.

Modern trade beyond tariffs

Modern FTAs are no longer just about lowering customs duties. Businesses today are equally concerned about how quickly goods move through ports, how easily certifications are recognised, whether regulations are predictable, and how much compliance effort is required to access preferential treatment. In many industries, these factors influence competitiveness as much as tariffs.

For Indian exports, New Zealand has extended duty-free access across 100% of its tariff lines. However, for businesses, particularly in labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, apparel, leather, and handicrafts, this is not merely a



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It is a strategic trade pact with long-term economic potential

removal of duties that had earlier reached to 10%, but a clear pricing advantage in a market otherwise dominated by established FTA partners. In a market where competing exporters already enjoy preferential access, even a single-digit tariff advantage can influence purchasing decisions.

On the other hand, India's approach is cautious. Sensitive sectors such as dairy have remained protected, reflecting a policy preference that has become increasingly visible in India's recent trade negotiations. The objective is clear: open and explore new opportunities without exposing vulnerable domestic industries to competitors.

Services could emerge as one of the most significant beneficiaries over the longer term. Indian businesses have strong capabilities in technology, consulting, engineering, health care, and education services. Greater market access along with clearer mobility provisions for professionals and students can make it easier for Indian firms to expand their presence in New Zealand. For a country where services account for an increasing share of economic output, these provisions deserve as much attention as tariff concessions.

Compliance unlocks trade benefits

One more feature that businesses should watch closely is the Rules of Origin (RoO) framework. Preferential access under an FTA is never automatic. Companies must demonstrate that products meet prescribed origin requirements before claiming lower duties. The India-New Zealand agreement incorporates detailed product-specific rules, documentation requirements, and traceability measures to prevent misuse through transshipment.

From a policy standpoint, this strengthens the

integrity of the agreement, while from a business standpoint; it raises the importance of supply chain visibility and compliance readiness.

The same principle applies to trade facilitation measures included in the pact. Faster customs clearances, digital certification systems, and simplified procedures often deliver tangible commercial benefits. Reduced delays can reduce inventory costs, improve cash flow, and create greater certainty across supply chains.

This agreement also aims to address non-tariff barriers, particularly in sectors where regulatory approvals often matter more than tariffs. Industries such as pharmaceuticals, food processing, chemicals, and agriculture could gain benefits if regulatory processes are streamlined and more predictable.

Preparing businesses for FTAs

Viewed more broadly, the agreement marks another step in India's transition towards a facilitation-led trade policy, where businesses enhance competitiveness not only through lower tariffs but also through reduced transaction costs, faster market access, and greater certainty across the trade ecosystem.

From a business perspective, the real opportunity lies not merely in availing lower duties but also in integrating operational, sourcing, and compliance functions with the framework of the agreement. Today, preferential access increasingly depends on demonstrable compliance, traceability, and process discipline. Given this, businesses should proactively review Harmonised System (HS) classifications, evaluate eligibility under the RoO framework, strengthen supply-chain documentation, identify sector-specific export opportunities, and reassess landed-cost models to maximise the commercial advantages offered under the agreement.

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Delhi-Dhaka thaw welcome. Build on it

IN THE Indian Subcontinent, a perceived “big brother” attitude vis a vis smaller neighbours is often a problem, and must be addressed through patient diplomatic engagement and the promise of tangible gains from the relationship. For the better part of two decades, until the ouster of former Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina on August 4, 2024, Delhi and Dhaka had arguably the most consequential relationship in the region. The chill in ties that accompanied the regime change in Bangladesh, then, was a major cause for worry. However, recent moves from both sides — most recently, the announcement that India would resume issuing tourist visas at pre-2024 levels — show that a much-needed thaw is underway. This must be built on.

The trust deficit between the two countries came to the fore almost immediately after the Muhammad Yunus-led interim government took charge. New Delhi expressed concern at the attacks on Awami League supporters, and on those belonging to the minority community. Measures like the withdrawal of transshipment facilities for Bangladesh’s export cargo earlier this year would have worried Dhaka. With the benefit of hindsight, India did not do enough to send the message that the value of the bilateral relationship did not depend on which party held sway in Dhaka. It rests, instead, on the deep affinities between the people of both countries. Fortunately, since the elevation of Tarique Rahman as PM, both sides have made efforts to correct the course. Meetings between leaders, including between PM Rahman and India’s External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, have sent out a positive message. As has India’s supply of fuel to its neighbour during the West Asia crisis.

Whether in bodies like the BIMSTEC, or for India’s larger ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region or its Act East policy, Dhaka remains an essential partner. Equally, Bangladesh cannot wish away the geographical and economic reality of its larger neighbour. On river-water sharing, the 4,000-km land border, power and a host of other issues, the two countries have much to gain through cooperation. For this potential to be realised, both must sidestep the rhetoric of short-term politics.

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More children isn't the answer to delimitation, tax challenges



C RANGARAJAN



J K SATIA

RECENTLY, THE Sample Registration System (SRS) and the sixth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) released their results.

What do they say about India's future population size? A University of Washington team had estimated India's total fertility rate (TFR) to be 1.9 in 2017, and its model showed that the population in India will peak at 160 crore in 2048. However, this estimate is optimistic as SRS estimates TFR to be 1.9 in 2024. The UN Population Division periodically updates its population projections and has estimated that the population is likely to peak at 170 crore in 2062 and decline thereafter. In view of the recent data, this is perhaps the most likely scenario.

There is very gradual progress, and, therefore, problems persist. The sex ratio at birth was estimated to be 918 in 2022-24, signifying a persistent "girl deficit" as the normal ratio is 955. It was 907 in 2018-2020. At this pace of increase, it will take 13 years to reach the normal rate, and the "girl deficit" will continue for even longer.

The most significant problem is the demographic divergence among states. The two highest-fertility states are Bihar and Uttar Pradesh at TFRs of 2.9 and 2.6 respectively, compared to 1.9 for India as a whole. At the current pace of decline in TFR, Bihar and UP will take 18 and 10 years to reach the replacement rate of 2.1, the rate at which the population size stabilises over a period of time.

One could argue that the way to reduce this divergence is to accelerate the decline in fertility of high-fertility states and increase it in low-fertility states. Let us examine each. Women's empowerment and contraception broadly determine the pace of fertility decline. The female population (aged six years and above) who ever attended school was 73.7 per cent for all India, but much lower in Bihar and UP at 64.1 per cent and 70.1 per cent respectively. Women with 10 or more years of schooling constituted 46.4 per cent at the all-India level but stood at 33.1 per cent and 42.5 per cent respectively in Bihar and UP. Use of any method of contraception among married women (15-49 years of age) was 69.1 per cent at the all-India

level and 59.3 per cent and 62.4 per cent in Bihar and UP respectively. Clearly, women's empowerment efforts as well as family welfare programmes to enable them to meet their fertility intentions need to be accelerated in these states.

What can be done to increase fertility in low-fertility states? Recently, Andhra Pradesh announced a new population management policy to address declining fertility, which includes (a) a one-time payment of Rs 30,000 for the third child and Rs 40,000 for the fourth child; and (b) a monthly nutrition stipend of Rs 1,000 for the third child, free education up to the age of 18 and extended maternity leave. While researching imminent population decline in Sweden in 1945, Alva Myrdal, in her book Nation and Family, commented that one-off measures are most unlikely to work.

However, the question is: Is it necessary for any state to increase its fertility rate? In India, differential growth rates in population may have implications beyond the purely economic. Currently, delimitation is a big question. No state wants to lose its importance in the political system. This needs to be tackled through means other than population policy.

There is no case for any state to raise the fertility rate. We are still quite far away from stabilising our population. Lack of population is not what is hindering the states from growing faster. What is needed is to prevent the level of population from determining political clout. In the case of tax devolution, the problem was solved by introducing two criteria — the level of population and demographic performance — in determining the states' shares.

India needs to pay more attention to population quantity and quality issues. The NFHS estimates of the TFR for Bihar and UP are lower than the SRS estimates. If so, this will quicken the time to achieve stability. We have to await Census results to get more definitive data on population issues.

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Lack of population is not what is hindering the states from growing faster. What is needed is to prevent the level of population from determining political clout

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

India-China cooperation can make Asian century a reality



XU WEI

THE WORLD stands at a turbulent crossroads. Hegemony, unilateralism and protectionism are exacerbating global deficits in peace, development, security and governance. As the only two nations with populations exceeding 1.4 billion, **the complexity of the India-China relationship is unmatched. With the centre of global gravity shifting to Asia, relations have transcended the bilateral scope.** Our combined contribution of over 40 per cent to global growth positions us as active architects of solutions. **By joining hands, China and India can transform Eastern wisdom into a stabilising force in the world. President Xi Jinping's four global initiatives constitute a coherent framework rooted in our shared philosophical traditions. These initiatives offer practical pathways for synergy between China and India.**

The **Global Development Initiative (GDI) seeks to put development at the top of the global agenda.** This dovetails with India's mission of **Viksit Bharat 2047.** Both nations understand development is an inalienable right. The GDI advocates for green, inclusive growth, urging a move away from zero-sum competition. By aligning our development paradigms, we can ensure that modernisation benefits all.

The **Global Security Initiative** champions common, comprehensive, cooperative, sustainable security. Its fundamental principles — **respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, adherence to the principles of the UN Charter, and the peaceful resolution of disputes** — **directly echo the Panchsheel (Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence), which India and China pioneered decades ago.** For neighbours sharing a vast border, the **GSI is a timely reminder that true security cannot be achieved by any single nation at the expense of others. Mutual trust remains the most reliable instrument for managing differences.**

The **Global Civilisation Initiative** advocates respect for the diversity of world civilisations, promoting equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness. This **resonates with India's philosophy of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*.** As ancient civilisations that have shaped human history for millennia, we share the wisdom that no single culture holds a monopoly on truth. **Through civilisational exchanges and mutual learning, we can overcome estrangement, break the "clash of civilisations" narrative, and build a world where people of all nations understand each other.**

The **Global Governance Initiative** aims to **build a more just and equitable global system. Its fundamental task is to uphold the authority and status of the UN;** the key lies in major countries demonstrating their responsibilities; and the most pressing task is to close peace and development deficits. **No country can achieve development by placing itself outside the global governance system, nor secure its future without international cooperation. Artificial isolation only leads to confrontation.**

China and India have the responsibility to safeguard Asia's peace and solidarity. So long as we respect each other's core interests and succeed together, we will inject positive energy into global development, security, civilisation, and governance. Together, we can make the Asian century a reality for all.

With the centre of global gravity shifting to Asia, relations have transcended the bilateral scope. Our combined contribution to global growth positions us as architects of solutions

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A passport that doesn't count, a narrowing idea of citizenship



FAIZAN MUSTAFA

CITIZENSHIP IS a vertical relationship between the individual and the state. Originally, citizenship used to signify a belief in certain liberal and republican ideas and did not have much to do with territory and status. Today, it is all about territory, status, and exclusion rather than inclusion. The Foreigners' Tribunals in Assam reportedly denied citizenship to people despite some possessing as many as 15 documents. The judiciary, too, has become quite restrictive in this regard.

In *Shabbir Hussain's* (1951) case — a trader who got stuck in Lahore during Partition and returned to India only on a temporary permit but was subsequently arrested for overstaying in India — the apex court refused to treat him as a Pakistani national. Similarly, in *Abdul Khader* (1960), the Supreme Court refused to treat Khader as a foreigner despite his having a Pakistani passport. But in *Ichar Ahmad Khan* (1962), the Court treated possession of a Pakistani passport as conclusive proof of Pakistani citizenship. By 2008, the Court had become even more restrictive when, in *Razia Begum*, it held that even possession of an Indian passport was not sufficient proof of citizenship.

B.R. Ambedkar said that the citizenship provisions of the Constitution had given the Constitution's Drafting Committee "a headache". Yet, the citizenship topic was considered so settled that no constitutional law syllabus included it with prominence. After the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA), citizenship became the most important subject not only for law students but for the masses. Though the government enacted the CAA with great alacrity, it took five years to notify its rules. The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in Bihar in 2025 and other states in 2026 has once again brought the citizenship debate to the centre stage.

The SC, in its Bihar SIR judgment, held that the passport is "conclusive proof" of citizenship. The latest clarification by the Min-

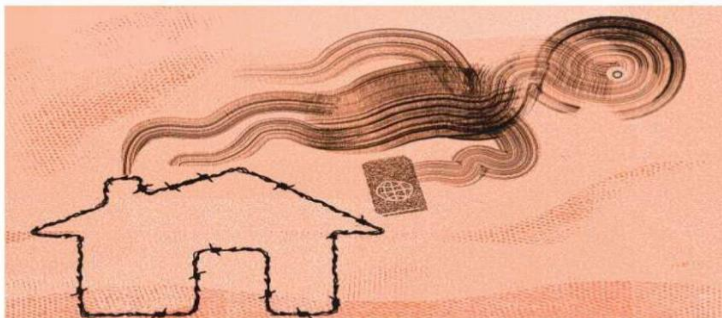


ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASKHUMAR

istry of External Affairs (MEA) has explicitly said it is nothing more than a travel document. Strictly in terms of law and judgments, the MEA is correct. But since the government does not issue any citizenship card or certificate, how should one prove their citizenship? Why hasn't a single resident of Assam among the 3.11 crore people whose citizenship was proved during the NRC exercise been issued a citizenship card? Is the latest clarification a precursor to such a document? If yes, not only will people have to queue up like during demonetisation, but just like the Assam NRC, an overwhelming number of Indians won't be able to prove their citizenship. In Assam, a majority of the 19 lakh excluded people were Hindus.

Article 5, on the commencement of the Constitution, conferred citizenship on every one born in India. Article 11 empowers Parliament to regulate citizenship by law, and thus the Citizenship Act was passed in 1955. It has been amended six times, but major amendments were made in 1986, 2003, and 2019. Parliament, over the decades, has narrowed the universal principles of citizenship incorporated in Article 5. Unlike the original Act, which gave citizenship on the principle of *jus soli* or by birth, the 1986 amendment was less

Since passports and voter ID cards can be issued only to citizens, why is there no presumption of citizenship? Is this not an official act?

inclusive as it added the condition that, in addition to one's own birth in India, one can get citizenship only if either parent was an Indian citizen at the time of birth. In 2003, an amendment under the Vajpayee government added that either both parents should be Indian citizens or one must be an Indian citizen and the other should not be an illegal migrant. With these restrictive amendments, India has almost moved towards the narrow principle of *jus sanguinis* — blood relationships become more important than birth on Indian soil.

Based on these provisions, how is Indian citizenship to be proved? Section 2(1)(e) of the *Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023*, says evidence can be either oral or documentary. "Proved" under Section 2(1)(f) means that after considering the matters before it, the court believes such a fact to exist or a prudent man would act upon the supposition that it exists. The crucial point is that "proved" is a subjective state of mind of the judge. "Disproved" under Section 2(1)(g) means a belief that it does not exist. The third concept is "conclusive proof", which under Section 2(1)(b) means that if a fact is declared by the evidence law as conclusive proof of another, on the proof of that fact, the court shall not allow

evidence to disprove it. Since today, a passport, Aadhaar, or voter ID card is not taken as "conclusive" proof of citizenship, evidence can certainly be given to disprove someone's citizenship status.

But evidence law also provides for certain "presumptions of fact" and "presumptions of law". Section 2(1)(h) lays down that whenever this law provides the court may presume a fact, it may regard it as proved unless it is disproved. Section 2(1)(i) says that when the evidence law directs that the court shall presume a fact, it shall regard it as proved unless and until it is disproved. Thus, in cases of rape where sexual intercourse by the accused is proved, Section 120 provides for the presumption that it was without consent.

Since passports and voter ID cards can be issued only to citizens, why is there no presumption of citizenship? Is this not an official act? Many of us have experienced police verification prior to the issuance of passports. Passport, voter ID, etc., require governmental satisfaction about citizenship. Section 78 of the *Sakshya Adhiniyam* says the court shall presume every document to be genuine if it is declared by law as evidence of any particular fact and is certified by any government officer. Section 104 says the one who asserts a fact bears the burden of proof. Shouldn't anyone who questions someone's citizenship despite a passport or voter ID bear the burden of proving such an assertion?

During the SIR, the EC insisted on certain documents and arbitrarily excluded Aadhaar and its own voter ID card, which the Supreme Court did not find problematic. But none of the documents included was a proof of citizenship. Under the law of estoppel, the government cannot deny citizenship to those to whom it had issued a passport or voter ID card, unless the same were obtained fraudulently. This author's own first passport explicitly certified him as a citizen. Why has this seal of citizenship been dropped? The proof of citizenship should be demanded only from those who are caught while crossing over to India, or a foreigner found in India with a passport of another country, or those born abroad. For anyone born in India, there must be a presumption of citizenship, and voter ID and a passport must be taken as conclusive proof of citizenship.

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