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1. India and Malaysia sign pacts to expand ties

Why in the News?

India and Malaysia signed 11 agreements during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kuala Lumpur, expanding cooperation in defence, semiconductors, trade, energy, digital technology, and maritime security. The two countries also agreed to promote local currency trade settlement (rupee–ringgit), and Malaysia reiterated support for India's permanent membership in a reformed UNSC. India additionally announced the establishment of a Consulate General in Malaysia, signalling a long-term diplomatic upgrade.



Background

India–Malaysia ties date back centuries through maritime trade, cultural exchange, and the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia. Modern diplomatic relations were established in 1957, the year Malaysia gained independence.

Key pillars of the relationship:

- Act East Policy: Malaysia is a strategic partner in India's engagement with ASEAN.
- Trade relations: Bilateral trade has crossed \$20 billion, with palm oil, petroleum products, electronics, and machinery forming core sectors.
- Diaspora link: Nearly 2 million people of Indian origin live in Malaysia.
- Defence ties: Regular military exchanges, training, and maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean.
- ASEAN centrality: Malaysia plays a crucial role in India's Indo-Pacific vision.
- Recent global shifts - supply chain diversification, semiconductor geopolitics, and Indo-Pacific security concerns- have given new urgency to deeper India–Malaysia cooperation.

Features

Semiconductor Partnership

- Framework pact for joint engagement in chip manufacturing and advanced electronics
- Aligns with India's semiconductor mission and Malaysia's manufacturing ecosystem
- Strengthens supply chain resilience in Asia

Defence and Security Cooperation

- Expansion of maritime security coordination
- Intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation
- Joint efforts for Indo-Pacific stability

Local Currency Trade

- Promotion of rupee–ringgit trade settlement
- Reduces dollar dependence
- Enhances financial sovereignty and trade efficiency

Trade & Investment Boost

- Fast-tracking ASEAN–India Trade Agreement review
- Focus on energy, advanced manufacturing, AI, health, and food security
- The CEO Forum opened new business channels

Diplomatic Upgrade

- New Indian Consulate General in Malaysia
- Strengthening people-to-people and business links
- Greater support for diaspora engagement

Challenges

Despite strong intent, several structural challenges remain:

- Trade imbalance concerns and non-tariff barriers
- Semiconductor ecosystem gaps in India (infrastructure, skilled workforce, technology access)
- ASEAN geopolitics and China's influence in the region
- Bureaucratic delays affecting business execution
- Currency settlement risks due to exchange volatility
- Maritime security tensions in the Indo-Pacific

Way Forward

- Accelerate the ASEAN–India Trade Agreement review
- Create joint semiconductor innovation hubs and skill partnerships
- Expand defence exercises and maritime domain awareness sharing
- Institutionalise rupee–ringgit settlement mechanisms
- Strengthen diaspora-led economic diplomacy
- Align supply chains under trusted partner frameworks
- Promote digital and green technology cooperation

Conclusion

The India–Malaysia agreements mark a strategic pivot from traditional diplomacy toward a technology-driven and security-oriented partnership. At a time of global instability, both nations are positioning themselves as Indo-Pacific growth anchors. If effectively implemented, these pacts can transform the relationship into a model of South–South cooperation - combining economic ambition, strategic trust, and regional stability.

2. 'Trade deal with U.S. enhances our relationship'

Why in the News?

India and the United States are close to finalising a formal Interim Trade Agreement, with Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal stating that negotiations are “nearly complete”. The deal is significant because it aims to deepen strategic and economic ties, expand market access, and recalibrate supply chains - while, according to the government, protecting India’s agricultural sensitivities.



Background

- India–U.S. trade relations have evolved from cautious engagement to a strategic economic partnership over the past two decades.

Key background points:

- The U.S. is one of India's largest trading partners
- Bilateral goods and services trade exceeds \$190 billion
- Cooperation spans defence, technology, semiconductors, clean energy, and critical minerals
- Both countries are members of the Quad, strengthening Indo-Pacific strategic alignment
- Past friction existed over tariffs, market access, and agricultural imports
- India has simultaneously pursued FTAs with the UK, EU, Australia, and EFTA

The interim agreement reflects an attempt to move beyond tariff disputes toward structured long-term economic integration.

Features

Protection of Agricultural Sensitivities

- Products where India is self-sufficient were excluded
- Use of quotas, phased reductions, and margin-of-preference tools
- Focus on safeguarding domestic farmers

Expansion of Indian Exports

- 0% reciprocal tariff access for spices, tea, coffee, and coconut products
- Boost for textiles and cotton exports
- Opportunity to double processed food exports (~\$55B currently)

Calibrated U.S. Market Access

- Limited opening in tree nuts and select commodities
- Imports are allowed where the domestic supply is insufficient
- Extra-long staple cotton imports to support the textile industry

Supply Chain Diversification

- India estimates a \$2 trillion import demand in 5 years
- Intent to shift sourcing toward trusted partners like the U.S.
- Reduce dependence on geopolitically sensitive regions

Strategic Alignment

- Strengthens defence and technology cooperation
- Supports Indo-Pacific economic architecture
- Reinforces democratic partnership narrative

Challenges

- Political resistance from farmer groups
- Fear of agricultural dumping
- Currency volatility and trade imbalance risks
- Overdependence on a single supply partner
- Domestic competitiveness gaps in high-value manufacturing

- Implementation complexity across sectors

Way Forward

- Transparent consultation with farmer unions
- Strengthening agricultural competitiveness and MSP safeguards
- Investment in value-added agro-processing exports
- Diversified sourcing even within U.S.-centric supply chains
- Institutional dispute resolution mechanisms
- Skill and infrastructure upgrades for export sectors

Conclusion

The proposed India–U.S. interim trade agreement represents a strategic shift from transactional trade to structural partnership. If carefully implemented, it could boost exports, secure supply chains, and elevate India’s global economic role — while the real test lies in balancing farmer protection, industrial growth, and geopolitical autonomy.

3. ‘Linguistic, cultural markers can solve caste enumeration riddle’

Why in the News?

Scholar-linguist G. N. Devy has proposed that linguistic and cultural markers could help India design a scientifically robust method for caste enumeration in the upcoming Census (2026–27). He argues that techniques used in language surveys can resolve duplication, spelling variations, and fragmented caste identities. He also warns that failure to explicitly enumerate Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) could alienate over 10 crore people.

Background

- India has not conducted a full caste census since 1931 (except SC/ST data)
- The 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) collected caste data but produced 46 lakh caste names, making classification difficult
- The next Census (2026–27) will include caste enumeration

Debate exists between:

- Open-ended self-declaration (SECC-style)
- Pre-listed caste categories (Bihar survey model)

Professor Devy suggests a third path: post-enumeration scientific consolidation using linguistic and anthropological tools.

Features

Mother Tongue as a Starting Marker

- 2011 Census recorded ~19,000 mother tongues
- Scrutiny layers reduced them to 1,369 verified languages
- Similar filtering can consolidate caste names

Multi-layered Cultural Markers

- Shared language
- Kinship and marriage patterns
- Lifestyle and ancestry
- Geographic clustering

Anthropological Certification

- Role for the Anthropological Survey of India
- Use of prior research like People of India project
- Scholarly audit of census categories

Explicit Enumeration of DNTs

- Communities historically stigmatised under colonial laws
- Currently fragmented across caste lists
- Need formal recognition in the Census



The methodologies of surveying and enumerating languages could be used to condense not just the 2011 SECC data but also the data from the upcoming Census. But this would require the government to keep the data open to scrutiny for scholars.

G.N. DEVY
Cultural activist



Challenges

- Political sensitivity of caste data
- Fear of social fragmentation
- Administrative complexity in classification

- Risk of misuse in electoral politics
- Lack of updated anthropological datasets
- Trust deficit among marginalised communities
- Privacy and data governance concerns

Way Forward

- Combine open-ended enumeration with post-census scientific review
- Institutional collaboration with universities and anthropological bodies
- Transparent methodology to build public trust
- Separate identification and tracking of DNT communities
- Digital tools for linguistic and kinship mapping
- Legal safeguards against misuse of caste data
- Public consultation with community groups

Conclusion

Caste enumeration is not merely a statistical exercise - it is a question of social recognition and historical justice. Professor Devy's linguistic-anthropological framework offers a way to balance accuracy, inclusivity, and scientific rigour. If implemented carefully, it could transform India's caste data from a political flashpoint into a foundation for evidence-based social policy.

4. A social media ban will not save our children

Why in the News?

- On February 4, 2026, three minor sisters in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, died by suicide, reportedly linked to screen addiction and family conflict.
- The incident triggered renewed public debate in India on banning social media for minors.



The discussion coincides with global regulatory moves such as:

- Australia's under-16 social media ban (effective Dec 2025)
- Spain's proposed similar restrictions (Feb 2026)
- The event has intensified calls for state intervention, raising questions about child safety, digital rights, and platform accountability.

Background

Growing research globally links heavy social media use with:

- anxiety and depression
- body image dissatisfaction
- self-harm risks
- especially among adolescent girls
- India lacks large-scale longitudinal data on digital mental health.
- Regulatory responses worldwide increasingly lean toward age-based bans and stricter platform control.

India's digital ecosystem is marked by:

- rapid smartphone penetration
- weak platform accountability
- large gender digital divide
- patchy parental awareness

The debate sits at the intersection of:

- child rights
- digital freedoms
- platform regulation
- public mental health
- surveillance risks

Features

A ban is technically ineffective

- Teenagers can bypass restrictions via VPNs.
- Risk of migration to unregulated dark web spaces.

Mandatory age verification may lead to:

- mass data collection
- surveillance infrastructure
- linking social accounts to government IDs

Social media is not purely harmful

- **Platforms act as lifelines for:**
 - rural youth
 - LGBTQ+ adolescents
 - differently-abled teens
 - socially isolated communities

- Provides identity formation and peer support.

Democratic deficit in policymaking

- Youth voices are absent in decisions affecting them.
- Policy is made for children without consulting them.

Gender inequality risks

- India's internet access gap:
 - 33.3% women vs 57.1% men (NSS data)

In patriarchal households:

- Bans may disproportionately restrict girls
- confiscation of devices is likely
- worsens social mobility gaps

Misplaced focus

- Outrage targets social media alone while ignoring:
 - AI chatbots
 - generative AI mental health advice
 - algorithmic risks
- Early evidence shows AI may:
 - Weaken critical thinking
 - expose minors to unsafe interactions

Challenges

Regulatory overreach vs child protection

- Balancing safety and civil liberties.

Platform accountability gaps

- Weak enforcement of duty-of-care standards.

Lack of Indian evidence

- Policy built on foreign research.

Gender digital divide

- Restrictions deepen inequality.

Surveillance risks

- Age verification can normalise mass data collection.

Policy simplification

- Complex social problems are treated with symbolic bans.

Technological arms race

- Youth adapt faster than regulators.

Way Forward

Shift from bans to accountability

- Introduce duty-of-care obligations for platforms.
- Enforce strong digital competition law.
- Monetary penalties for harmful algorithmic design.

Independent digital regulator

- The expert body is insulated from political influence.
- Move away from ad hoc bureaucratic censorship.

Evidence-driven policymaking

- Fund Indian surveys and longitudinal research.
- Include children as stakeholders in research design.

Child-centred digital literacy

- National curriculum on media and algorithm literacy.
- Parental awareness programmes.

Gender-sensitive access policies

- Protect girls' digital participation.
- Targeted digital inclusion schemes.

AI safety regulation

- Extend child protection frameworks to AI systems.
- Mandatory safety audits for conversational AI.

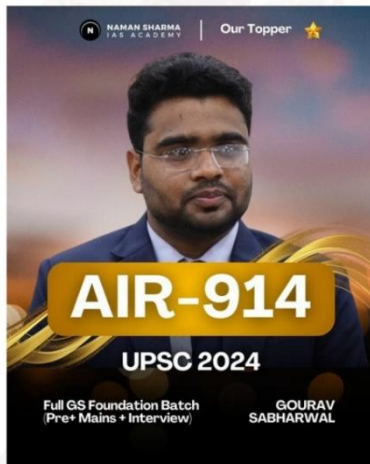
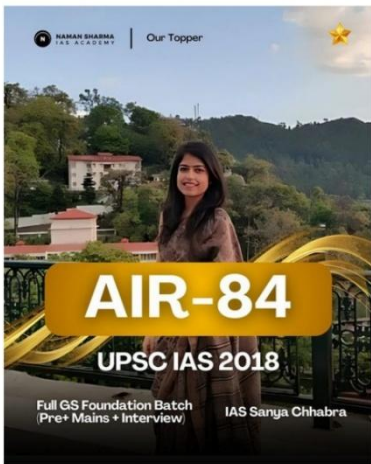
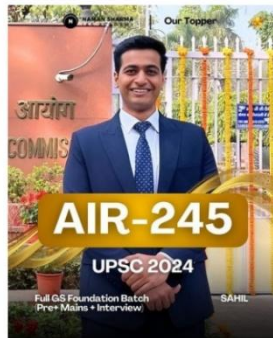
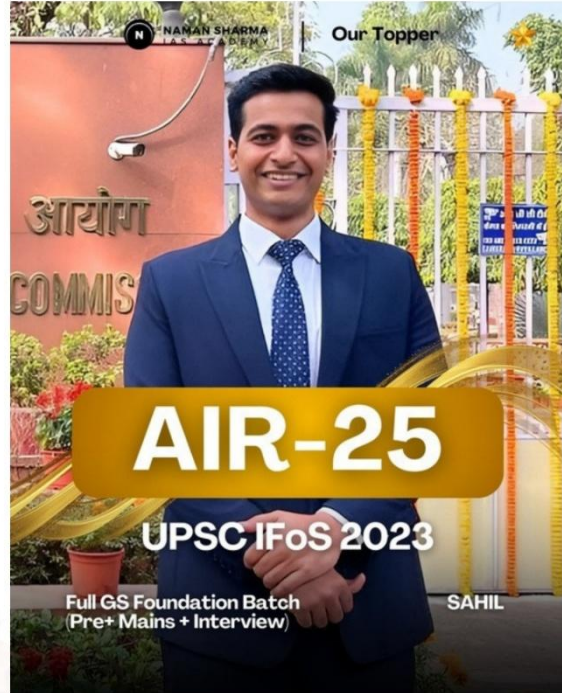
Healthy media ecology

- Encourage balanced engagement rather than prohibition.
- Promote safe platform design and moderated spaces.

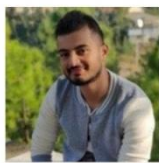
Conclusion

A blanket social media ban offers political symbolism but fails as a sustainable child-safety strategy. It risks surveillance expansion, gender exclusion, and regulatory theatre while ignoring the deeper architecture of platform harm. The real task is not eliminating technology, but building a healthy media ecology grounded in accountability, evidence, and inclusion.

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