THE EDITORIAL PAGE

MUST INDIA BAN SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CHILDREN?

Over sixty per cent of children in India spend over three hours on their mobile phones every single day, and an equal percentage show increased impatience, aggression, and hyperactivity, with almost half showing signs of depression and lethargy at a very early age. However, there are still no safeguards to limit, let alone debar, children from using online content which is often detrimental to young minds.

Germany has taken a lead in this regard. Germany's new Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, is considering legally barring children from accessing social media. Merz argues that one should not underestimate the power of algorithms, artificial intelligence, and targeted manipulation that accompany social media and harm young minds. With both his conservative bloc and coalition partners signalling support for tighter controls, Germany may soon join a growing list of nations that are banning social media for young people.

Germany would not be acting alone. Australia became the first country to require platforms to cut off access for children, and governments in France, Spain, Greece, and the United Kingdom are weighing similar measures. Indeed, the risk is too grave to ignore. Algorithms amplify outrage, disinformation spreads with viral efficiency, and artificially generated images and videos blur the line between fact and fiction. The big question is whether we should allow digitally engineered manipulation to shape young minds and, by extension, democratic culture. This is true for Germany, and it is true for India. Advocates of restrictions point to mounting evidence linking excessive social media use to anxiety, depression, body-image issues, and declining attention spans. They warn of grooming, cyberbullying, and radicalisation. Social media raises profound questions about mental health, civic trust, and childhood itself. Back home in India, the case for banning social media for children is equally strong, but it may not be that easy to achieve, and there are larger questions about stifling the creativity, learning, and positive support that one can gain from social media. Besides, prohibition may drive usage underground, making platforms harder to monitor and children less likely to seek help when needed. Age verification systems raise privacy concerns and can be circumvented. For many young people, especially those marginalised offline, digital communities offer vital support networks. Many underprivileged children also use it to learn skills and crafts that they cannot otherwise afford.

The way out, therefore, lies in layered reform. Age-appropriate design codes, stricter data-collection limits, algorithmic transparency, and heavy penalties for platforms that fail to remove harmful content could shield children from online harm. Besides, raising awareness and equipping young people to recognise manipulation and misinformation can go a long way in promoting the responsible use of social media. The best approach, therefore, could be to regulate rather than ban it — but this must be done sooner rather than later.

Dealing with Indo-US trade deal

Vivek Singh

The interim trade framework between the largest economy in the world, the USA, and the fastest-growing economy, India, is set to be a game-changer and a historic trade deal. It marks an initial step towards a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) between the two major economic powers. The framework will boost exports from labour-intensive Indian sectors such as textiles, footwear, plastics and smartphones. The India-US trade deal will cut tariffs on 60per cent of Indian exports to the US and includes provisions for zero tariffs on multiple items entering the US market. This will provide India access to the $30 trillion US market with lower tariffs than competing countries.

India will gain a competitive edge as the US has lowered tariff rates from a peak of 50 per cent to 18 per cent on Indian exports. In comparison, tariffs on China stand at 34 per cent, South Korea 25 per cent, Bangladesh 20 per cent, Vietnam 20 per cent, and Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand 19 per cent. The US has effectively reduced tariffs by 32 per cent on Indian exports. Zero duties on selected products will enhance India's export competitiveness. The move reflects market-reopening measures aimed at strengthening economic cooperation and trade relations between the two nations.

The broader framework will deepen economic engagement between India and the US. Several products exported from India — including spices, tea, coffee, gems and jewellery, diamonds and pharmaceuticals — will enjoy zero duty access. Around $44 billion worth of Indian merchandise exports are expected to gain this benefit. This will strengthen India's position in global trade and accelerate its role in emerging sectors such as artificial intelligence (AI), hardware and compute ecosystems. Over the next decade, India could attract nearly $80 billion in AI-related investments, further establishing itself as a global hub in this domain. The agreement is expected to unlock the $120 billion US textile market for Indian exporters. With lower tariffs compared to competitors such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and China, India will gain a distinct advantage. A 50-60 per cent increase in textile exports to the US market is anticipated in the coming years.

India remains heavily dependent on imported crude oil, with nearly 85 per cent of demand met through imports. Diversifying supply sources has been a strategic priority. Imports from Russia have risen significantly in recent years. Under the trade framework, India is also expected to accelerate crude oil imports from Venezuela, potentially enhancing energy security.

The announcement of the framework has boosted investor confidence. India has emerged as a preferred destination for foreign institutional investors, with a noticeable rise in investment inflows. Both nations are working towards achieving Mission 500 — a target of $500 billion in bilateral trade by 2030. The deal is also aligned with India's Viksit Bharat Mission 2047. India's GDP, currently around $4 trillion, is projected to reach $35 trillion by 2047, making high-quality manufacturing and service delivery critical for sustained growth. Agriculture and food exports are likely to benefit significantly.

While US agricultural exports to India stood at $2.25 billion, India's exports to the US reached $6.2 billion. This figure is expected to cross $10 billion soon. In FY25, India imported $45.62 billion worth of US goods while exporting $86.5 billion to the US. Total bilateral trade stood at $132 billion, with India enjoying a $41 billion surplus. The US remains the third-largest investor in India, contributing around $70 billion between 2000 and 2025.

India has prioritised protecting sensitive sectors such as agriculture and dairy, including wheat, rice, milk and cheese. The textile and apparel sector remains a crucial contributor to exports. With zero-duty access to a $130 billion US market, India will benefit from lower tariffs compared to competitors like China, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Pakistan. The global textile market, valued at $900 billion, is expected to exceed $1.4 trillion by 2030. India currently holds a 4 per cent share, compared to China's 40 per cent and Bangladesh's 8 per cent. With exports of $37 billion last year, the sector aims to reach $100 billion by 2030.

The deal will also strengthen India's performance in gems and jewellery. Indian exporters will gain access to a $60 billion US market with zero duty on diamonds and platinum. This provides an advantage over competitors such as South Africa (30 per cent), China (30 per cent) and Thailand (19 per cent). India will also gain improved market access in footwear and leather ($42 billion), toys ($18 billion) and machinery and parts ($480 billion).

India has not committed to purchasing $100 billion annually from the US for five years. Instead, it has expressed intent to increase imports worth $500 billion over five years in energy, ICT, coal, aircraft and related sectors.

However, tariff relief remains temporary and conditional. While US tariffs have been reduced from 53 per cent to 18 per cent, earlier MFN status provided rates as low as 3 per cent. The US is also urging India to reduce dependence on Russian crude oil, which currently accounts for 35 per cent of India's imports worth $50 billion in FY25. India saves around $2 billion annually through discounted Russian oil, while the US accounts for $87 billion (20 per cent) of India's exports.

Despite these complexities, the interim framework is poised to reshape India's export trajectory and pave the way for a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement between the two economic giants.

MOONIS RAZA: A LEGENDARY EDUCATIONIST

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Moonis Raza was an epitome of education and learning, irrespective of caste, colour, and creed. Born on 2 February 1925 in Ghazipur of Uttar Pradesh in a middle-class family, the eldest of the three brothers of Masoom and Mehndi Razas, Moonis was only middle class passed, but had tremendous qualities of leadership and organization. At the age of 40 years, he jumped trade unions of sugarcane cultivation. In 1965, he became the chairman of AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress. In 1968, he jumped into Congress as a leftist and first met Smt. Indira Gandhi in Triveni Bhawan, Allahabad. Did his graduation from Aligarh Muslim University. He completed his post-graduation in general education, where he met Nurul Hassan, who referred his name to head the Indian Council of World Affairs along with Ali Mohammad.

Due to an uprising between Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits, Moonis was sent as Principal of the Regional Engineering College Srinagar in 1970, where, because of his diplomatic qualities and religious toleration, he pacified the tense situation and brought peace among students in Srinagar.

After the 1971 India-Pakistan war, Moonis Raza was summoned by Indian PM Smt. Indira Gandhi to establish an educational institution in memory of India's first Prime Minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. Between 1972-73 Moonis went to Australia (ANU Canberra) and England (Cambridge & London Universities) to frame a set of interdisciplinary subjects, by which the Jawaharlal Nehru University Act was passed in the Indian parliament on 23 February 1973, as a result of which the Jawaharlal Nehru University came into existence in June 1973.

While in A.M.U. Moonis Raza came into contact with Prof. Mohd. Shafi, who inspired him to establish a center for the study of regional development in J.N.U in 1973. Thus, Moonis Raza became the first rector of J.N.U as well as the chairman of CSRD/ SSS.

During this time Moonis Raza entered into educational diplomacy and undertook an Indo-French symposium on regional development in 1978.

As a rector of J.N.U. Moonis Raza also held symposiums on regional development in Russia, Mongolia, and Japan.

Thereafter, Moonis Raza was appointed as Director of NIEPA (National Institute of Education, Planning and Administration Delhi.

In 1988, he was appointed as Vice Chancellor of Delhi University. Besides academics, Moonis Raza was an ardent devotee of music & literature.

In his tenure at J.N.U., he brought Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan of Pakistan to have a qawwali concert in Parthasarthy Plateau in 1986.

Besides, Moonis Raza wrote more than 25 books on 'The Valley of Kashmir, tribal politics in Afghanistan, regional development in Iran, and others. He chaired a large no. of UGC projects on urban and transport geography under Prof. Mathur and Prof. Ramchandran. In addition to the above, there were many contributions of Prof. Moonis Raza in the field of education, such as: The Valley of Kashmir: A Geographical Interpretation (1978): A seminal work providing an in-depth geographical analysis of the region. An Atlas of Tribal India (1986): A detailed study using district-level data to map and interpret tribal geography. Atlas of the Child in India (1986): A collaborative effort with Sudesh Nangia exploring the spatial distribution of child-related metrics. Transport Geography of India (1986): Focused on commodity flows and the regional structure of the Indian economy. Higher Education in India: A Comprehensive Bibliography (1991): An extensive reference work on the Indian educational landscape. Education and the Future: A Vision: A look at the strategic direction for education in India.

Why India's future will be decided in its neighbourhood

Mahendra K Singh | Akhilendra K singh

India stands at a moment of strategic contradiction. Its global profile has expanded, its diplomatic reach has widened, and its economic ambitions have grown. Yet it is surrounded by one of the most unstable and contested neighbourhoods in the world, where shifts in power directly shape its security and global credibility.

In the 1990s, India and China were broadly viewed as peer competitors. By 2026, that balance has altered decisively. China has surged ahead economically, technologically and militarily, while deepening its strategic alignment with Pakistan, including military support during crises with India.

At the same time, South Asia is marked by political churn and economic stress. Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal remain fragile; the Maldives has oscillated sharply in its foreign policy orientation; Afghanistan continues to pose humanitarian and strategic dilemmas; and Pakistan remains locked in internal instability. All this is unfolding at a time when the United States, the world's only superpower, is reassessing its global commitments, including the degree to which India fits into its long-term strategic calculus.

Against this backdrop, India's Neighbourhood First Policy is not a diplomatic slogan or an exercise in goodwill. It is a strategic necessity.

A simple but often overlooked truth needs emphasis: India's future will not be decided first in Washington, Beijing or Brussels. It will be shaped, above all, in Kathmandu, Dhaka, Colombo, Malé and Islamabad. These are not merely neighbouring capitals; they are the strategic nodes that directly influence India's security, economic prospects and global credibility. This reasoning aligns closely with structural realism theory, which emphasises that geography and regional balances of power shape a state's strategic destiny more decisively than intentions or rhetoric. States operate within structural constraints imposed by proximity and power distribution, and India's neighbourhood represents precisely such a constraint.

For decades after Independence, India's neighbourhood policy was guided by moral idealism, non-alignment, anti-colonial solidarity and the assumption that shared history would automatically produce trust. That approach was ethically sound, but experience has delivered a harsher lesson. Good intentions do not guarantee stable neighbourhoods, and shared history does not automatically translate into shared interests.

Neighbourhood First represents India's strategic maturation. It acknowledges that India's internal transformation and its global aspirations are inseparable from regional stability. This policy is neither an act of charity nor a display of benevolence. It is a clear expression of enlightened self-interest.

In contemporary South Asia, power does not operate through sentiment; it operates through transactions and tangible outcomes. New Delhi has recognised that being a friendly neighbour is not enough. India must become an indispensable partner — economically, infrastructurally and strategically.

This recalibration is inseparable from China's expanding footprint in the region. India has drawn two clear conclusions. First, China cannot be wished away. Second, India does not need to displace China to succeed. Rather than confrontation, New Delhi has opted for calibrated realism.

The core of this approach lies in building asymmetric interdependencies - relationships in which neighbouring countries derive concrete, long-term benefits from engagement with India. When cooperation delivers results, strategic deviation becomes costly. This realism explains why India engages with governments it agrees with and those it does not. Political leadership changes; ideologies shift; rhetoric fluctuates. Geography does not.

Across Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives, India's priorities are increasingly defined by dialogue, delivery and durability. Connectivity has emerged as the most powerful instrument of this strategy. Railways, ports, power grids, digital payment systems and energy corridors are no longer just development projects; they are strategic assets. From the Greater Malé Connectivity Project to hydropower cooperation with Bhutan and electricity trade with Bangladesh, India is quietly reshaping South Asia's economic geography. Infrastructure, today, is quiet geopolitics.

Equally important is India's development cooperation model. While some external powers rely heavily on collateralised loans and opaque financing, India has emphasised grants, concessional credit, humanitarian assistance and crisis support. Its role during Sri Lanka's economic collapse, debt relief to the Maldives, and disaster response across the Bay of Bengal have all contributed to trust-building.

Yet, realism demands humility. Outcomes have been uneven. Bhutan remains India's closest partner but is also exploring diversification. In Nepal, domestic politics frequently weaponises anti-India sentiment. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka value India, even as they remain deeply embedded in Chinese economic networks. The Maldives has demonstrated how quickly domestic nationalism, amplified by external actors, can dilute Indian influence.

The most complex challenges remain Pakistan and Afghanistan. India's policy towards Pakistan, even after calibrated military signalling through Operation Sindoor, has yielded only modest results, reinforcing deterrence without producing a fundamental shift in Pakistan's strategic behaviour. In Afghanistan, New Delhi continues to walk a tightrope between humanitarian responsibility and strategic risk, particularly as China consolidates its presence.

Perhaps the greatest source of diplomatic anxiety for India today is not a single adversary but an unstable neighbourhood.

Elections, from Nepal to Bangladesh, Myanmar to Thailand, are taking place amid economic distress, youth disenchantment and declining faith in traditional politics. This is where Neighbourhood First faces its real test.

First, India must recognise that the most credible proof of diplomacy is delivery. Projects must be completed on time, commitments must be visible, and assistance must be felt on the ground.

Strategy succeeds only when it moves beyond paper and alters lived realities.