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A Troubling Judgment and Endorsement of the SIR

Context

- The Supreme Court's judgment upholding the **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** of electoral rolls conducted by the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** has generated significant debate regarding **electoral governance**, **constitutional authority**, and **democratic participation**.
- While the judgment endorses the ECI's efforts to improve the accuracy of electoral rolls, concerns remain about the legality of the exercise, the timing of its implementation, and the implications for the **right to vote** and **citizenship verification**.
- These issues have far-reaching consequences for India's electoral democracy and the protection of citizens' political rights.

Constitutional and Legal Framework Governing Electoral Rolls

- **Constitutional Provisions**
    - The Constitution establishes the foundation of electoral democracy in India through several key provisions:

        - **Article 324** empowers the ECI to supervise elections and prepare electoral rolls.
        - **Article 325** guarantees a common electoral roll and prohibits discrimination in voter registration.
        - **Article 326** provides for **universal adult suffrage**, ensuring voting rights for all eligible citizens.
        - **Article 327** authorizes Parliament to enact laws relating to elections and electoral rolls.
    - Together, these provisions seek to balance **electoral integrity** with **democratic inclusion**.
- **Statutory Framework**
    - Electoral roll preparation and revision are governed by the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960.
        - **Section 21(2)** provides for regular revisions of electoral rolls before elections and permits **intensive revision** according to prescribed procedures.
        - **Section 21(3)** allows the ECI to conduct a **special revision** in a constituency or part thereof when necessary.
        - **Rule 25** outlines the procedure for intensive and summary revisions.

Controversy Surrounding the Special Intensive Revision (SIR)

- **Question of Statutory Validity**
    - A major controversy concerns the legal basis of the SIR. The Supreme Court accepted that the exercise could be undertaken under **Section 21(3)**.
    - However, an alternative interpretation suggests that the provision authorizes only a special revision, not an intensive revision.
    - Since **intensive revision** is specifically provided under **Section 21(2)** and **Rule 25**, combining both categories into a single exercise may blur an important statutory distinction.
    - This raises questions about whether the SIR was conducted under the appropriate legal provision.
- **Timing of the Revision**
    - Intensive revisions involve extensive verification of voter records and generally require substantial time for implementation.
    - In States such as Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal, the exercise was undertaken shortly before Assembly elections.
    - The statutory scheme traditionally favours summary revision close to elections in order to minimise disruption and ensure voter participation.
    - Conducting a large-scale intensive revision during this period creates concerns regarding **voter exclusion**, procedural fairness, and access to effective remedies.

Citizenship Verification and Institutional Authority

- **Determination of Citizenship Documents**
    - Another contentious issue relates to the identification of documents required to establish **citizenship**.
    - The **Ministry of Home Affairs** is responsible for administering citizenship laws and determining legal standards for proof of citizenship.

    - The ECI’s role has traditionally been limited to verifying voter eligibility on the basis of legally recognized documents.
    - By prescribing specific documentation requirements, the ECI exercised considerable discretion in determining voter eligibility.
    - This development raises questions about the division of responsibilities between electoral authorities and agencies responsible for citizenship matters.
- **Implications for Voter Inclusion**
    - The judgment grants significant authority to the ECI in assessing citizenship-related documentation for electoral purposes.
    - While the final determination of citizenship remains with the competent authorities, exclusion from electoral rolls can have substantial consequences.
    - Individuals unable to satisfy documentary requirements may face **disenfranchisement**, reduced political participation, and uncertainty regarding their civic status.
    - Consequently, the issue extends beyond electoral administration and touches upon broader concerns of **citizens’ rights** and democratic representation.

Impact on Electoral Administration

- The judgment also refers to **cumulative inaccuracies** and **structural deficiencies** in electoral rolls prepared over several decades.
- These observations suggest a need for reforms aimed at improving the accuracy and reliability of voter lists.
- At the same time, broad criticism of past electoral roll management may affect public confidence in electoral institutions.
- Therefore, efforts to strengthen electoral accuracy must be accompanied by robust safeguards that protect legitimate voters from wrongful exclusion.

Conclusion

- Accurate voter rolls are essential for free and fair elections, but the process of maintaining them must remain consistent with constitutional principles and statutory safeguards.
- The Supreme Court’s judgment significantly strengthens the authority of the **Election Commission of India**, particularly in matters relating to electoral roll revision and voter verification.
- However, it also raises important questions concerning **judicial oversight**, **administrative accountability**, **citizenship verification**, and the protection of **voting rights**.
- As a result, the judgment is likely to remain a landmark reference point in future debates on **electoral reforms**, democratic governance, and constitutional democracy in India.

A Troubling Judgment and Endorsement of the SIR FAQs

Q1. What is the Special Intensive Revision (SIR)?

Ans. The Special Intensive Revision is a comprehensive exercise undertaken by the Election Commission of India to revise and verify electoral rolls.

Q2. Which constitutional provision empowers the ECI to prepare electoral rolls?

Ans. Article 324 of the Constitution empowers the Election Commission of India to prepare electoral rolls and conduct elections.

Q3. Why has the legality of the SIR been questioned?

Ans. The legality of the SIR has been questioned because critics argue that intensive revision is permitted under Section 21(2), not Section 21(3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1950.

Q4. What concern arises from conducting the SIR close to elections?

Ans. Conducting the SIR close to elections may lead to voter exclusion and reduce opportunities for affected voters to seek redress.

Q5. Why is the issue of citizenship verification controversial?

Ans. The issue is controversial because determining proof of citizenship is generally considered the responsibility of the Ministry of Home Affairs, not the Election Commission of India.

Source: **The Hindu**

The Oman CEPA, A New Gateway For India's Exports

Context

- The India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) came into force on June 1, 2026.
- Bilateral trade between India and Oman has already grown from $8.94 billion in FY2023-24 to $11.18 billion in FY2025-26, reflecting deepening economic complementarities even before the CEPA came into effect.
- In this context, this article highlights that the CEPA agreement is far more than a trade deal — it is a modern framework that builds on one of the world's oldest bilateral relationships and opens a strategic gateway for India into the Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa.

India's Expanding Trade Architecture

- The Oman CEPA does not stand alone. It is part of India's deliberate strategy of deepening trade ties through comprehensive agreements.
- India has recently concluded or is pursuing CEPAs with the UAE, Australia, EFTA, UK, New Zealand, and the EU.
- Oman is the latest addition — and a strategically important one, given its location at the crossroads of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.
- Before this agreement, only 15.33% of India's exports entered Oman at zero duty under the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) regime.
- The CEPA changes this dramatically: Oman now offers duty-free access on **08%** of its tariff lines, covering 99.38% of India's exports by value.

- This is a sweeping competitiveness boost for Indian exporters.

Sector-by-Sector Benefits

- **Textiles and Apparel**
  - India already holds a dominant position — 43% of Oman’s woven apparel imports and 31% of knitted apparel imports.
  - The existing 5% tariff is now eliminated. This directly strengthens India’s competitiveness against China, the other major supplier in this market.
- **Chemicals**
  - India supplies nearly 39% of Oman’s inorganic chemical imports. Tariff-free access will amplify this already strong position further.
- **Engineering Goods**
  - This is perhaps the biggest opportunity. Oman imports over $3.7 billion in mechanical machinery and $3.3 billion in automotives annually.
  - India’s current market share is just 5% and 2% respectively — indicating enormous headroom for growth.
  - The CEPA’s preferential access can help Indian engineering exports penetrate Oman’s infrastructure, construction, and industrial sectors.
- **Pharmaceuticals**
  - India holds around 10% market share in Oman’s pharmaceutical market.
  - Here, the benefit is not tariff reduction but regulatory facilitation — products approved by leading international regulators will receive fast-tracked approvals, reducing compliance costs and accelerating market entry.
- **Food and Agriculture**
  - Duty-free access has been granted for products like meat, eggs, honey, butter, and processed foods.
  - However, sensitive sectors — dairy, cereals, edible oils, and key agricultural commodities — have been kept outside tariff concessions, protecting domestic producers.

Trade Facilitation: Cutting Red Tape

- Beyond tariffs, the CEPA introduces important procedural reforms:
  - Oman will accept certificates from India’s Export Inspection Council (EIC), eliminating duplicative testing.
  - India’s NPOP organic certification and halal certification systems are now recognised.
  - Dedicated provisions on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) will improve regulatory transparency.
  - Fast-track customs clearance for perishables will reduce costs and improve efficiency for time-sensitive exports.

Services and Professional Mobility

- This is where the CEPA breaks new ground. Bilateral services trade stood at $863 million in 2024, with India enjoying a surplus of nearly $447 million.
- Yet India's share in Oman's global services imports is just over 5% — indicating substantial untapped potential.
- Oman has made binding commitments for Indian professionals in accounting, engineering, IT, healthcare, education, and consulting.
- Quotas for intra-corporate transferees have been raised, enabling greater movement of Indian specialists.
- Provisions for AYUSH and traditional medicine create additional opportunities in the Gulf's growing wellness sector.

Oman's Strategic Location: A Gateway, Not Just a Market

- The editorial's most important insight is geographical. Oman is not just a destination market — it is a **logistics and strategic hub**.
- Its ports at **Sohar, Duqm, and Salalah** are emerging as major industrial and shipping hubs connecting the Gulf, Indian Ocean, and East African economies.
- For Indian businesses, the CEPA makes Oman a potential launchpad into the wider GCC region and East Africa — markets far larger than Oman itself.
- This strategic dimension elevates the agreement well beyond bilateral trade.
- The benefits will reach across India's industrial geography — textile clusters in Tamil Nadu, gems and jewellery in Gujarat, engineering hubs in Maharashtra and Punjab, pharma manufacturers in Telangana, and seafood exporters in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

Conclusion

- The Oman CEPA is history meeting opportunity — an ancient maritime partnership reimagined for the 21st century.
- Its true worth will be measured not in its text, but in how boldly Indian businesses choose to walk through the door it has opened.

The Oman CEPA, A New Gateway For India's Exports FAQs

Q1. Why is the Oman CEPA important for India's trade strategy?

Ans. The Oman CEPA expands India's trade network, provides extensive duty-free market access, and strengthens economic integration with the Gulf and neighbouring regions.

Q2. How does the Oman CEPA benefit Indian exporters?

Ans. The agreement grants duty-free access to most Indian exports, improving competitiveness in sectors such as textiles, chemicals, engineering goods, pharmaceuticals, and food products.

Q3. What advantages does the Oman CEPA offer for services and professionals?

Ans. The CEPA provides market access and mobility opportunities for Indian professionals in IT, healthcare, engineering, education, consulting, and accounting sectors.

Q4. Why is Oman's geographical location strategically significant for India?

Ans. Oman's ports connect the Gulf, Indian Ocean, and East Africa, making the country a logistics hub and gateway for expanding Indian trade.

Q5. What trade facilitation measures are included in the Oman CEPA?

Ans. The agreement recognises Indian certifications, streamlines customs procedures, improves regulatory transparency, and enables faster clearance of perishable and agricultural exports.

Source: **TH**

India's Expanding FTA Network – Opportunities and Emerging Structural Challenges

Context

- With the India–Oman Free Trade Agreement (FTA) coming into force on June 1, India now has **15 FTAs covering 27 countries**, while nine more agreements involving 42 countries are nearing completion.
- Once finalized, FTA partner countries could account for nearly 75% of India's exports.
- However, the rapid expansion of FTAs has highlighted **four major concerns**: rising trade deficits, low utilisation of FTA benefits, worsening inverted duty structures, and the relocation of manufacturing to FTA partner countries.

Rising Trade Deficits with Major FTA Partners

- **Key trends:**
    - Between 2007-09 and 2024-25, the trade deficit with ASEAN increased by 381%, with Japan it increased by 318%, and with South Korea it increased by 268%.
    - In contrast, India's trade deficit with the rest of the world rose by 142%.
    - Over the last three years, the average annual trade deficit with ASEAN, Japan and South Korea reached around **$62 billion**.
    - Under **newer FTAs** (UAE, Australia, Mauritius and EFTA countries), India exported $48.6 billion in FY2025 but imported nearly $100 billion, creating a deficit exceeding $50 billion.
- **Exception:** South Asia remains an outlier, where India's trade surplus expanded from $6.7 billion to $20 billion.
- **Structural reason:**
    - Most FTA partners already maintain low Most Favoured Nation (**MFN**) tariffs, whereas India's trade-weighted MFN tariff remains around 12.6%.
    - Consequently, tariff reductions provide substantial benefits to foreign exporters entering India. Indian exporters gain **limited additional market** access because partner-country tariffs were already low or

zero.

Low Utilisation of FTA Benefits by Indian Exporters

- Despite numerous FTAs, Indian exporters make limited use of preferential market access.
- **Reasons for low utilisation:**
    - Many partner countries already offer near-zero MFN tariffs.
    - Potential tariff savings are often too small to justify compliance costs related to rules of origin (**RoO**), certification procedures, documentation and paperwork.
- **Outcome:**
    - Only 20–30% of eligible Indian exports utilise FTA preferences.
    - In contrast, import-side utilisation rates are estimated at 60–70% because tariff reductions in India generate significant cost advantages for foreign suppliers.
- **Core issue:** Both rising imports and low export utilisation stem from the same factor: **tariff asymmetry** between India and its FTA partners.

Worsening Inverted Duty Structure

- **Meaning:** An inverted duty structure occurs when import duties on raw materials and intermediate goods are higher than duties on finished products.
- **Impact of FTAs:** Many finished goods from ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, UAE and Australia enter India at low or zero duty, while domestic manufacturers continue to pay duties on imported inputs.
- **Sectoral examples:**
    - **Engineering and machinery:**
        - Steel and aluminium attract MFN duties of 7.5–10%. Machinery and engineering products made from these materials often enter duty-free under FTAs.
        - Domestic manufacturers face higher production costs than foreign competitors.
    - **Chemicals, plastics and textiles:**
        - Inputs such as caustic soda, soda ash, polypropylene, PVC, and styrene-butadiene rubber (SBR), attract import duties. Finished products can often be imported at lower tariffs.
    - **Consequences:** Reduced competitiveness of downstream industries, lower domestic value addition, and challenges to the objectives of Make in India and manufacturing-led growth.

“Make in ASEAN, Sell in India” Phenomenon

- A growing concern is the relocation of production to FTA partner countries.
- **How it happens:** Inputs imported into India remain costly due to tariffs. Finished goods manufactured in FTA partner countries can be exported to India duty-free. Firms therefore find offshore production more profitable.
- **Emerging trends:**
    - ASEAN economies such as **Vietnam**, Thailand and Indonesia are increasingly serving as manufacturing hubs for the Indian market.
    - Chinese firms have invested heavily in these countries.

    - Several Indian companies have also established factories and joint ventures there.
- **Affected sectors:** Electronics, steel, chemicals, plastics, consumer goods, and engineering products.
- **Implications:** Movement of investment and jobs outside India. Weakening of domestic manufacturing ecosystems. Erosion of supply-chain resilience and industrial capacity.

Way Forward

- To ensure FTAs support industrial development rather than undermine it, India must:
    - Align tariffs on industrial inputs with FTA commitments.
    - **Rationalise** inverted duty structures.
    - Improve FTA utilisation through simpler compliance procedures.
    - **Strengthen** domestic manufacturing competitiveness.
    - Conduct regular impact assessments of FTAs on trade, employment and industrial growth.
    - **Integrate** trade policy with the goals of Make in India, Atmanirbhar Bharat, and global value chain participation.

Conclusion

- India's FTAs are expanding its global economic integration and export opportunities, but persistent trade deficits, low export utilisation, inverted tariff structures, and offshore manufacturing incentives pose significant challenges.
- Addressing these structural issues is essential to ensure that **FTAs** become instruments of **industrial strengthening**, employment generation, and sustainable economic growth rather than drivers of import dependence and deindustrialisation.

India's Expanding FTA Network FAQs

Q1. How does tariff asymmetry contribute to rising trade deficits under India's FTAs?

Ans. Higher Indian MFN tariffs compared to low tariffs in partner countries make imports grow faster than exports after tariff reductions under FTAs.

Q2. Why is the utilisation rate of FTA benefits by Indian exporters relatively low?

Ans. Low or zero MFN tariffs in partner countries reduce the incentive to comply with Rules of Origin for marginal tariff savings.

Q3. What is an inverted duty structure, and how do FTAs aggravate it?

Ans. It occurs when duties on inputs exceed those on finished goods, and FTAs worsen it by allowing many finished products to enter India at low or zero tariffs.

Q4. What is the phenomenon of "Make in ASEAN, Sell in India" in the context of FTAs?

Ans. Firms increasingly relocate production to ASEAN countries to benefit from lower costs and duty-free access to the Indian market.

Q5. What policy measures are necessary to ensure FTAs strengthen India's manufacturing sector?

Ans. India must rationalise input tariffs, correct inverted duty structures, improve FTA utilisation, etc.

Source: IE
